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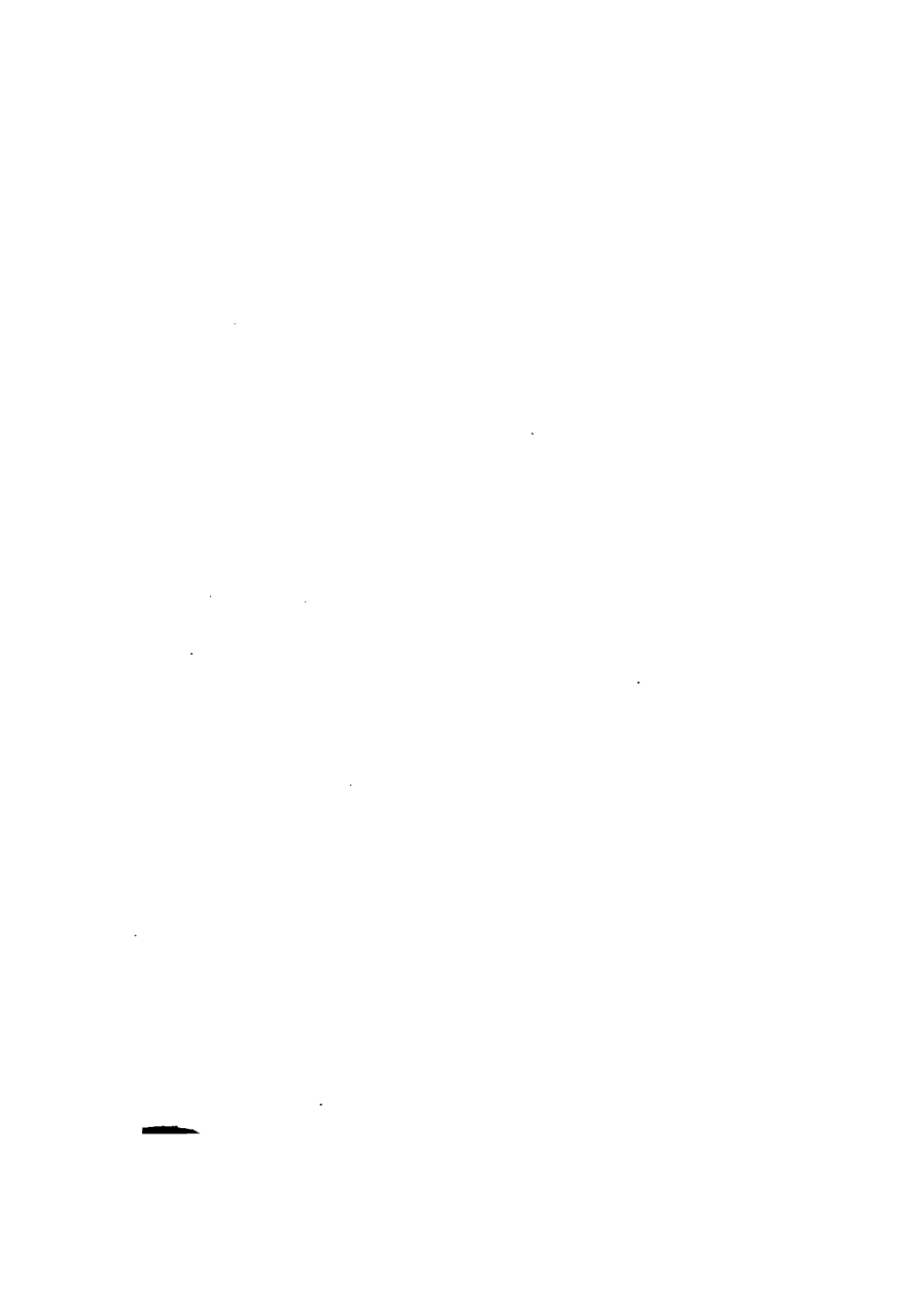
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HYPERÆSTHESIA.

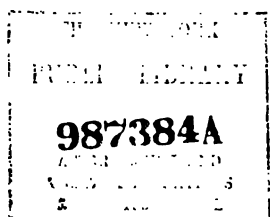
A Nobel.

By MARY CRUGER.

"Die of a rose, in aromatic pain."

—POPE'S *Essay on Man*.

NEW YORK:
FORDS, HOWARD, & HULBERT,
1886.



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By MARY CRUGER.

To
MY FRIEND AND MY FATHER'S FRIEND,
AUGUSTUS M. SCRIBA,

United States Bank Examiner, New York City,

WHOSE KINDLY SYMPATHY IN PRIVATE DISTRESS AND STEADY
NERVE IN TIME OF PUBLIC APPREHENSION HAVE WON
FOR HIM BOTH AFFECTION AND RESPECT,

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

THE idea which this story seeks to illustrate—that morbid supersensitiveness of the nerves, although a physical fact, is no more real than a similar condition of mind and spirit in a fairly healthy body—is one not so often recognized as it should be. And the suggestion of remedial influences for all these classes of sufferers—even under such frivolous surroundings as the summer resort which furnishes the various elements of my little book—may perhaps give a new source of comfort to the hyperæsthetic victims themselves, some fresh ideas to their often too careless and inconsiderate friends, and some interest and amusement to the mere “lookers-on in Vienna,” who like to see life in all its phases.

HYPERÆSTHESIA.

"Die of a rose, in aromatic pain."

—POPE'S *Essay on Man*.

CHAPTER I.

THE fierce rays of the afternoon sun, which had for hours beaten and glared upon the broad piazza, condemning it to utter silence and desertion, were faintly subdued at last, shorn of their gorgeous splendor, as the great luminary drooped slowly towards the west. Though still glowing, it was with chastened brightness, as the cool sea-breeze allayed the heat that had so oppressively reigned all that ardent July day. The stately trees on the lawn cast long, refreshing shadows over the grass, and gradually the deepening shade charmed into more active existence the inmates of the house, till now so apparently deserted.

First, with the buoyant hopefulness of youth, little Arthur and Lily Bradford came flying out on the long hotel piazza in merry glee, giving in one instant an air of brightness and enjoyableness to the whole scene. With still echoing laughter over some foregoing jest or incident, they flitted restlessly about for a moment, idly displacing the chairs, which had been ranged in such solemn state and formality along the wall. Then, as the faint whistle of an approaching train was borne upon the air, Arthur exclaimed,

"I'm off to the station, Lily! Will you come too?"

"May we?" she asked cautiously, yet wistfully. "You know mamma said—"

"She didn't tell *me* not to go," he answered impatiently, with conscious sophistry. "It is all very well for little girls—"

"Arthur, you know she told you not to leave me," with imploring earnestness and faintly quivering lips.

"Well, then, you little torment, go and ask her. I will wait just one minute;" sitting astride the arm of a chair in lordly independence of mien and attitude as he spoke.

Lily turned eagerly towards the door, but stopped abashed, as her mother came serenely

out, chatting with her companion, Mrs. Wayland, and they paced languidly, to and fro, over the full length of the piazza, which extended along the whole front of the house.

As Lily hesitated, fearing to disturb her mother's conversation too abruptly, Arthur, unable to resist the temptation offered by the sound of the train fast nearing the station, slipped off while Mrs. Bradford's back was turned, and ran down the foot-path, on one side of the lawn, quickly disappearing from Lily's disconsolate gaze, as she looked longingly, but in subdued despair, after him.

"Do you know if any new arrivals are looked for?" asked Mrs. Wayland, a fair, coquettish widow of about thirty, although her *petite* figure and girlish vivacity of manner would lead a casual observer to imagine her much younger.

"I am not sure," replied Mrs. Bradford indifferently. "I have not heard anything definite; only the room next Miss Ashton's has been arranged to-day, as though some one were expected."

"Probably, then, a gentleman. It is to be hoped so; for Mr. Maynard is beginning to be tiresome, and to presume upon being our only beau."

"Is he?" with quiet amusement.

"Indeed, yes. He quite impertinently ignored

my suggestion of a row this afternoon, pleading letters to write; and Mrs. Oldham took him to task."

"Ah! mother has such old-fashioned ideas of the formal courtesy always due to a lady;" and a faint tone of covert sarcasm betrayed itself in Mrs. Bradford's voice, as she added tranquilly, "I fancied, nevertheless, he was with the Ashtons part of the time. I am almost sure I recognized his voice reading aloud in their room."

A little flush of annoyance stole over Mrs. Wayland's fair face at this, and she hastened to say, with scarce subdued irritation,

"Here come your husband and Arthur, walking in their usual lazy fashion, followed by two strangers;—no! one is James, carrying a valise."

"Then there is a new arrival!" composedly said Mrs. Bradford, as she took the patient, grieving Lily by the hand, not having been altogether unobservant of her little tribulations, and advanced to meet her husband, casting at the same time one curious, inquiring glance at the stranger who followed, a little behind them.

Mrs. Wayland also watched him as he approached in seeming unconsciousness of so much observation; and when he was led by James to a side entrance, she turned eagerly, on his disappear-

ance, to a group just coming through the door-way behind her, exclaiming, with pretty vivacity,

“O, Mrs. Ashton! if you had come but a moment sooner, you would have seen our latest arrival.”

Mrs. Ashton, with painfully indolent movements, sank languidly, with a long weary sigh, into the capacious easy-chair, whose soft, billowy masses of cushions offered apparently such perfect repose and luxurious ease. Yet she shrank shiveringly from their first contact, and the lovely rounded outlines of her features took a momentary sharpness, while a faint gray pallor quenched the delicate bloom of cheek and lip.

Mr. Ashton bent over her in grieved sympathy, murmuring softly, as he clasped her hands with cautious gentleness, fearful lest even that light touch should add to her pain,

“My precious Clare, how it pains me to see you suffer!”

But even from his tenderness she recoiled with undisguised shuddering, leaning back, with closed eyes, as though overpowered by actual agony.

He turned to his sister with a despairing appeal in his gaze, too full of sympathetic grief to have one thought of reproach for the selfishness of pain which could thus repulse his devotion.

Rose Ashton, far more fragile and delicate in appearance than the invalid they so tenderly cared for, with eyes full of pained sensitiveness, could only bestow on her brother a look of cordial, sweet approval; and then, with the cool, refreshing, but almost imperceptible touch of her fingers, she soothed the sufferer's irritated nerves into comparative composure, as she lightly passed her hands, fraught with subtle magnetism, over the pale brow, smoothing away the lines of pain, and bringing back the expression of gentleness which was wont to be there.

Then, thoughtful always of every claim on her attention and kindness, as Mrs. Ashton failed to make any response to Mrs. Wayland's remark, she said pleasantly,

"Have you any idea who is the new-comer?"

"I can tell you all about him," interrupted Fred Maynard, drawing indolently towards the group. "I met him on the stairs just now, and, to my surprise, recognized an old friend—Frank Hilton."

"Frank Hilton!" repeated Mr. Ashton. "How delightful! He was for years my most intimate friend, although we have not met for a long time. I must find him at once, and bring him to you, Clare. I know you will like him."

She looked with a faint yet pleased interest after

him as he disappeared in the house, saying absently,

"I wonder what he is like. Do you know, Rose?"

"No," replied Rose, smiling approvingly at her rare though slight degree of pleasure; "but I have heard Harry forever praising him to the sky, as the most delightful of good-fellows; so he may be really an acquisition."

Meantime Mr. Ashton had hastened to his friend's room, entering rather unceremoniously after a preliminary knock, and grasping his hands cordially, as he exclaimed,

"What a pleasant surprise! Did you know we were here, or have you only accidentally stumbled upon us?"

"I had not the faintest idea of it, old fellow," returned Frank Hilton, scarce yet recovering from the surprise of this encounter. "It is just delightful!—but who are 'we'?"

"My sister, whom I think you know—no?" as his friend negatively shook his head; "that is strange. I was sure you had met long ago. Then you surely remember Clare Murray?"

"Very indefinitely. You all used to rave about her beauty; and I think you once pointed her out to me across half a dozen lovely faces, whose inter-

vening charms distracted my attention considerably from hers. What of her now?"

"She is now Clare Ashton."

"Your wife! How is it I have never heard of this before? Did you think I could forget or grow careless of your existence?"

"You were abroad so long I had entirely lost sight of you. You ought to have hunted us up at once on your return."

"I would, dear old Harry, only—" pausing with a sudden look of pained remembrance.

"What is it, Frank?—has not all gone well with you all these years?"

"O, yes! I do not complain if fate has failed in being uniformly kind. Happiness and misery lie so close together. Let us speak rather of you,"—with a sudden gloom only half thrust aside by the resoluteness of his will.

A quick, keen look at his friend's darkening face showed Harry Ashton how untimely and inconsiderate would be further questioning; and he continued cheerfully:

"There is very little more to be said of myself; but for Clare's failing health I should not have a wish ungratified. She suffers at times so much—"

"Indeed! what is it?" returned Hilton, with an earnest sympathy of tone and manner.

"I hardly know. Some mysterious disease of the nerves, which is cruelly afflicting, and tries her terribly. The doctors give it a very long, high-sounding name you could not understand better than I do—"

"You forget I am myself a doctor—"

"Have you indeed undertaken to practice?" with a sudden hopeful inspiration. "Oh, if by a fortunate providence you could suggest even the faintest relief for my Clare! Come at once and let me present you."

"I am ready now—only let me warn you not to be too sanguine of help from me where others have failed; nervous disease is singularly unmanageable."

As they came out upon the piazza, now quite animated by the presence of all the household variously grouped upon it, while the Bradford children were playing absurd antics on the grass below the steps, in the moment's confusion caused by the simultaneous announcement of dinner, Frank Hilton imperfectly comprehended the words of introduction with which his friend presented him to Mrs. and Miss Ashton.

He looked with pitying scrutiny upon Rose's pale, shadowy loveliness, and glanced at the wasted, almost transparent hand she placed on his arm as they turned to enter the house, while Harry Ashton

followed, supporting his wife with careful solicitude. Hilton walked in, utterly silent, unable to find one appropriate word of address for the fragile sufferer he believed he was escorting.

A hitherto vacant seat next Rose having been assigned to him at the dinner-table, he was soon able to collect his scattered ideas, and to enter upon a conversation, subdued and fragmentary at first, but gradually assuming more sprightliness of tone; while he wondered a little at Harry's complete absorption in his own companion, whose identity he had failed to comprehend.

Becoming presently bewildered and then partially enlightened by Rose answering some questions of Harry's, who addressed her by name, he observed perplexedly,

"Have I been making a blunder? Are you, after all, Harry's sister?"

"For whom else did you take me?"—looking in grave curiosity at him."

"I must have been dreadfully stupid, but I fancied you were Mrs. Ashton."

"How could you make such a mistake! Did not Harry tell you of her sufferings?"

"It was just that which bewildered me. My first hasty glance so strongly impressed me that you were the invalid, that I have been expending ever

so much sympathy upon you all this time, which I suppose you will tell me was entirely misplaced."

She colored deeply under his searching gaze, as she replied hurriedly:

"Of course it was. I, fortunately, am always well; but Clare is indeed to be pitied."

Again he glanced keenly at the slight frame, the sensitive features, almost quivering with suppressed feeling, and then beyond at the graceful curves and fuller outlines, where only the general expression of weariness and pain betrayed the invalid.

Deeply interested in this strange contrast, making but the inner comment that he should carefully study these apparently contradictory conditions, Frank Hilton more brightly replied,

"I have been wandering so long, in all sorts of odd places, my wits have become dulled indeed, my perceptions blunted. I must ask your forbearance till I have again become accustomed to civilized life."

"How I envy you such wanderings!" she replied. "People who go abroad always follow a certain established route, which one becomes very tired of hearing described. I have imagined so many charming, out-of-the-way nooks and corners which nobody ever finds."

"I think the mere fact of knowing that a place

has an established reputation, and must be admired or enjoyed, as it were, by rule, is quite enough to destroy its attractiveness," he rejoined; "at least it is so with ill-regulated minds like mine."

"Just as in childhood we best like stolen fruit, however inferior to the regulation supplies;" and she smiled, with a sudden archness which for an instant quite transfigured her face, giving it a joyous look far more in keeping with its youthful grace and contour than her usual expression of subdued sadness."

"Have you too felt that?" he asked, with answering gayety. "Perhaps we should all take naturally to good deeds, if they were only forbidden."

"That would be a dangerous experiment, with our perverse natures. We might then take a freak of obedience."

"Dear Miss Ashton," plaintively came Mrs. Wayland's voice across the table, "you are saying such bright and naughty things over there, I cannot help listening. May I?"

A faint shadow of reserve stole over Rose's sensitive face as she replied, with grave courtesy,

"I fear my foolishness scarcely deserves a wider audience. Did you find the book I sent to your room this afternoon?"

"O, yes—and have enjoyed it so much. Hav-

ing disappointed me of my row by carrying off my cavalier, it was very thoughtful of you to send the book, to make amends," glancing with coquettish reproachfulness at Fred Maynard as she spoke.

Amused and interested by all this, Frank Hilton marked every varying expression of Rose's face, comprehending at once her concealed annoyance in the resolute compression of her lips as she refrained from the utterance of one word in answer to Mrs. Wayland, although her heightened color and one quick flash from her eyes showed how keenly she felt the attack.

"Indeed, Mrs. Wayland," remonstrated Fred Maynard, "you must not blame Miss Ashton for my failure to meet your wishes. I really had letters to write—"

"And have you really written them?" she asked, with incredulous mockery of tone and manner.

"O yes, and mailed them too," replied the unsuspecting delinquent eagerly.

"Well, then, I will forgive you, and restore you to favor, if you will take me on the water this evening instead. After all, it will be cooler and pleasanter than in the sunlight."

"This evening?" hesitated Fred, glancing entreatingly at Rose. "I am not sure: I think I have an engagement."

"Not with me, Mr. Maynard," replied Rose quietly. "I have promised the children this evening's leisure."

"Then, Mrs. Wayland, I am entirely at your service,"—with an exaggerated gallantry and *empressement* in his annoyance at this rebuff.

"As they presently left the table, Mrs. Ashton cordially urged Hilton to go with them to their own rooms, not wishing to separate him so soon from her husband, and yet feeling too weary to attempt further sojourn among the gayer inmates of the house.

Rose soon left them, to amuse the little Bradfords in the absence of their parents, who had gone on a drive; and Frank, after sitting some time talking over old times with Harry, while covertly watching with deepest interest the invalid's every word and movement, retired at quite an early hour, pleading fatigue after his journey. But he sat for more than an hour at his open window pondering deeply.

CHAPTER II.

ONE morning, a day or two later, as they left the breakfast-table, at which Mrs. Ashton never appeared, Frank Hilton, in slightly lowered tones, asked Rose to take a walk with him before the early dewy freshness of the day should have gone.

A little surprised, she hesitated, saying gravely, "Clare may need me; and—"

"You ought to know I would not ask it without a sufficient reason," he rejoined earnestly. "I can wait till you are at liberty; and meantime I have this,"—showing a book he held in his hand,—"which I will study till you come to share my labors."

"What is it?" making a face, and regarding it distastefully. "Be assured I have no curiosity in that direction."

"But you ought to have. Please don't be tormenting; but come at least to the summer-house, where I will explain, when safe from interruption."

"Well," a little reluctantly, "I can really go now, better than later; but you are very absurd with your mysteries."

And soon they were safely ensconced where the

shade of wide-spreading branches and the movement of cool, soft breezes left no suggestion of summer heat.

"Do not be alarmed at this proposed medical study," said Frank, smiling at her look of half-curious repugnance. "I am so interested in Mrs. Ashton's unfortunate condition—"

O! is it for her? Can you suggest any comfort?" cried Rose eagerly, her eyes brightening and glistening with hope and tenderness.

"It is impossible to do more than experiment," he replied gravely. "While the remedies she is using tend to the general strengthening of the system, aiming thus to restore the lost tone of the nerves, it has seemed to me possible to hasten this process in various ways."

"Tell me first what is her disease. The doctors talk so vaguely; and I have often thought nursing would be so much more effectual, if intelligently accomplished."

"Let me read you what the great Robley Dunglison says here: 'General hyperæsthesia is a highly exalted state of the sensibility, in which the sufferer cannot bear the slightest unusual impression to be made upon the senses; and even the minutest changes of atmospheric density and temperature produce disagreeable sensations.'"

Rose drew a long breath, saying thoughtfully, "How exactly that describes her. But oh!" with a wistful, longing expression his heart ached to see, "what chance for real cure is there? You, who do not see her daily, hourly, as I do, cannot even imagine how terrible it all is."

"I think I see more than you suppose," he answered gently. "Not only do I profoundly pity her suffering, which is only physical, and with all its acuteness does not materially affect her health, but I see also Harry's weary pain in knowing and beholding it, and yours in sympathetic watchfulness, which is cruelly injuring you—"

"Do not speak of me!" with sudden impatience; "tell me only of any possible added care for her!"

He felt a little puzzled at her sensitive shrinking from all allusion to her own too-evident delicacy and fragility; wondering if she could indeed be so absorbed in her care for others as to be insensible to its wearing effect on herself. Then, closing his book he exclaimed somewhat hastily,

"In another moment we shall be discovered, and I really have some suggestions to make. See! Maynard and Mrs. Wayland are coming this way. We can escape, for a while at least, by taking this side-path. By the way," he added, as they passed behind a mass of shrubbery which effectually

screened them from the advancing pair, "why did you neglect to present me to Mrs. Wayland that first day at dinner, when she made the opportunity by addressing you?"

"Did you notice that?" flushing in slight embarrassment, as she looked down shyly. "I have an odd scruple about introducing people. I always feel a responsibility, should anything but good come of it, in having taken the initiatory step. It seems to me only less than a written indorsement."

"But for whom did you fear?" rather quizzically. "My old friendship with Harry ought to assure you."

"Of course you, being well vouched for, occupied a different position from Mrs. Wayland, of whom we know comparatively nothing, having just accidentally met her here."

"I see," looking much amused now. "Should I get into any difficulties on her account, as you did not introduce me you will not feel obliged to help or protect me. Very prudent, indeed, on your part!"

"There is no reason why you should 'get into difficulties,' as you call it. A man of your experience surely needs no protection by an ignorant girl."

"Very ignorant, no doubt! But I was to *improve your mind* about hyperæsthesia. My idea is

to discover any caprice or fancy Mrs. Ashton may have, which could be used to divert her thoughts from herself. She has so accustomed herself to look for pain at every sound or touch, that it comes with double force. If we could only so amuse or interest her that she would be less conscious of external impressions—”

“I know !” interrupted Rose with sudden ardor ; “like the martyrs of old, who, absorbed in the cause for which they suffered, are said to have scarcely felt the horrible torturing they endured.”

“Exactly,” he replied, looking admiringly upon the delicate features, so glowing now with hopeful inspiration. “Do not, however, build too confidently on this slender chance. A mere chance it is; but still it can do no harm to try it, even if it fails entirely.”

Here a sudden turn in the path brought them face to face with Mrs. Wayland and Fred Maynard.

“Well, truants !” exclaimed the fair widow brightly, “you were very dexterous in disappearing so repeatedly. We want you to come with us for a long, lovely drive in the mountains.”

“You are very kind,” replied Rose, with gentle reserve, “but I could not leave my sister so long. She is probably looking for me, even now.”

“But don’t you know, Miss Ashton,” answered

Mrs. Wayland persistently, "you are far more in need of rest and care than—"

"Pardon me,"—very coldly now,—*"I am the best judge of that."*

"Do you not agree with me, Mr. Hilton?" and Mrs. Wayland turned entreatingly to Frank, as he stood observing with interest this little scene. "Is not Miss Ashton too negligent of her own health? I am sure you must think so."

"I should not dare to be guilty of the impertinence of speaking on such a subject without her permission," he answered gravely; "I have been too recently admitted to her acquaintance to take such a liberty."

"Nonsense!" she retorted pettishly; "you are as bad as the Englishman who would not save some one from drowning because he had not been introduced."

"It *would* be rather awkward to be reproached afterwards for such unceremoniousness," he replied, assuming a look of mock seriousness.

"How ridiculous! Please never use such overstrained reserve with *me*!"

"I never will. Since you so kindly dispense with it, I will never inflict ceremony on you,"—his eyes brightening the while with an expression somewhat puzzling to her, which Fred Maynard met

with laughing appreciation; but Rose turned away with a slight flush and a look of faint disapproval that he was quick to detect and deprecate.

"May I go with you to Mrs. Ashton?" he asked, with anxious earnestness, as she moved some steps from them towards the house.

"I think not," she replied, with a little tremor of nervous shrinking she could not control. "It is too early for her to receive you now; and I shall be closely occupied for a while. After you return from this drive, perhaps—"

"But I am not going," he interrupted hastily; adding in a lower tone, as he came nearer to her, "Have I hurt or offended you? Forgive me."

She became a little pale, and a look of pain came into her eyes as she spoke tremulously,

"It is nothing. Please do not keep me now."

He drew back before that glance of entreaty, so suggestive of a wounded sensitiveness, while feeling dimly conscious that he at least shared in the offence that her eyes so mutely yet keenly re-proved; and as Rose passed quickly on towards the house, he inly resolved to study more closely that shrinking reserve, under whose repulse he chafed impatiently.

"How painfully ill Miss Ashton looks!" softly and pathetically murmured Mrs. Wayland, as she

observed his regretful withdrawal of the look which had almost insensibly followed Rose's retreat. "She is a dear, lovely girl, and my heart aches to see her so careless of her health."

"She is evidently worn and wearied with the care of her sister and her natural anxiety for her," replied Frank Hilton quietly; "but with a good constitution she ought readily to recover from that depression when its cause is removed."

"How cold-blooded you medical men always are in your opinions!" looking up, with arch reproachfulness in her pleading blue eyes. "One would think you might speak a little more feelingly in seeing that sweet girl so sacrificed."

"I do not like exaggerated terms," he replied, still guardedly. "Are not strong feelings best kept somewhat in reserve?"

"You confess then to a 'strong feeling' towards Miss Ashton?"

"Towards all the Ashtons—yes. The most earnest friendship of my youth and manhood deserves that much, certainly," speaking with a little impatience of her persistent questioning.

"If you are as faithful in love as in friendship—"

He started at these words, and a dark flush came over his face, leaving it slowly again, till its som-

ber pallor checked even Mrs. Wayland's audacity of speech.

A grave, awkward silence ensued for a moment, and then Fred Maynard exclaimed, with an effort at his usual ease of manner,

"Well, Hilton, if you are going with us—"

"I must ask you to count me out this time. We could not return in time for an appointment I have made."

"I am sorry," he answered absently; adding, as he turned to Mrs. Wayland, "What, then, shall we do?"

"O, Mrs. Bradford and the children will go," she replied indifferently. "I will go at once to ask them;" and she flitted gayly away, secretly annoyed, nevertheless, at Frank Hilton's declining to go with them, and curious beyond endurance over his evident pain at her recent careless speech.

"You do not fancy Mrs. Wayland," observed Fred Maynard as they sauntered slowly towards the house."

"My dear fellow, there are so many just such pretty, coquettish women in the world, that one more or less does not make much impression," shrugging his shoulders expressively as he spoke.

"You prefer the shy inanimateness of Miss Ashton, perhaps," speaking with assumed carelessness,

yet darting a keen glance sidewise at his companion's meditative face.

"Miss Ashton is at least genuine, if not demonstrative. But she is one of the few women we meet of whom we fear to speak carelessly. She does not provoke comment, and so should be spared it."

"Yet she might be very charming but for that dash of sudden reserve she so frequently repels one with."

"You can always take refuge at such times with Mrs. Wayland, who is less cruel in that particular," with quiet sarcasm in his tone as he spoke.

"Really, Hilton, you are unjust towards the pretty widow, and ungrateful for the smiles with which she has especially honored you."

"I do not care very much for any woman's smiles, however liberally bestowed. A deserved frown interests me more than an unsought smile."

"Very queer and cynical, that! It is a sentiment I must investigate. Did Miss Ashton frown?"

"My good soul! please leave Miss Ashton's name out of our discussions, and be off on your expedition. Rest assured you will find no rival in me with either or any fair one. So dismiss your apprehensions."

"My dear Hilton—"

"Not another word ! *Au revoir*," replied Frank, walking rapidly into the house with a parting wave of the hand and a mocking laugh, rather disconcerting to the confused Maynard, who had not looked for such a discovery of his own feelings and motives.

Reaching his room, Frank Hilton threw himself weariedly into a chair, murmuring impatiently,

"How tiresome all this is ! Must I find human nature always so weak ? Are there none above these petty passions ? Is there no life apart from them ?"

CHAPTER III.

FRANK HILTON had been enjoying that keenest of all delights to an intelligent traveler—an audience that not merely listened attentively, but could draw out a more animated narration by well-timed comments and questions. It was curious to notice in the little party who composed it how varied were the sensations experienced. Harry Ashton gave himself up to it with all the enthusiasm of a man whose vivid instincts have, in a quiet, secluded life, been denied the gratification they craved, of personally knowing and seeing the world. Mrs. Ashton, usually so restless and impatient of all attempts to amuse her, listened with absorbed attention; delighting above all, with morbid fancy, in every painful or horrible detail, which Rose received with averted eyes or shuddering distaste, deep as was her interest in all else.

Reaching at last the subject of tattooing, as practised among certain savages, Mrs. Ashton was eager to have it fully described, questioning Frank Hilton with a minuteness almost painful to Rose, as she listened in shrinking silence; and he fairly

hesitated at last, in pity of the young girl's irrepressible discomfort. Seeing this, Rose compelled herself to seem interested, by asking, in a desperate effort to say something,

"And with all this inflicted, repeated pain, only permanent disfigurement results! Why could not a process be discovered, equally endurable, and producing some pretty effect?"

"Something like it has been done," he replied, smiling at her odd question. "In a way not really unpleasant, very ingenious designs are stamped upon the flesh, which are quite as pretty as many of the jewels and bracelets women wear in civilized countries."

"O, tell me of them!" said Mrs. Ashton, quite eagerly, for her.

"If you like, I can show you a specimen," he answered, pushing aside his sleeve as he spoke. "I was actually barbarian enough to have my own wrist so marked."

"It is really artistic!" exclaimed Mrs. Ashton, as he let her examine closely the wrist, on which a pale, distinct blue vine, with delicate bell-like blossoms, was clearly marked. "Come and look, Rose. You will not mind this at all."

Half reluctantly, Rose bent over his hand, yet prolonging *her first* brief glance in surprise and

unwilling admiration at this really decorative tattooing.

"And it was not very painful?" she questioned doubtfully.

"Scarcely at all. If interested in watching the artist, you would probably not mind it in the least."

"I should be sure to imagine a pain even if there were really none," returned Rose, with a slight shiver of horror, as she returned to her seat.

"Nonsense, Rose; you are too imaginative," said Mrs. Ashton, a little irritably. "Now I, so far from fearing it, only wish I could try the experiment. You could not import one of your savages, Mr. Hilton, for the purpose, I suppose?"

"Not so readily as I could resolve myself into one, at your service," he answered carelessly.

"You?" she asked, with quick, momentary pleasure. "Could you really do it yourself?"

"Very easily. You may select any design, not too intricate for my small artistic pretensions, and I can promise you a bracelet which will not soon wear out, at least."

"Rose, let us each have one. The idea is so charming!"

With a quick gesture of repugnance Rose was *about to speak*, when Frank Hilton, making an

almost imperceptible sign of silence, asked her hastily,

"While I go to my room for the coloring I need, which I happen to have with me, may I ask you, Miss Ashton, to supply me with a very fine pencil?"

As they thus left the room together, he detained her for an instant in the corridor, saying earnestly,

"Do not discourage Mrs. Ashton in this. I purposely introduced the subject, hoping to lead to just this result—"

"But if she should not be able to bear it?"

"On the contrary, she will take a morbid delight in the sensation, not really exactly pleasant."

"And this is one of your intended experiments? You believe it will do her good?"

"It cannot be otherwise. Do you not see in her state of supersensitiveness much is accomplished in rendering even one sensation acceptable, rather than the reverse, which is her usual fate."

Rose stood, with unconsciously clasped hands, looking intently in his face, questioning with ardent, penetrating gaze his inmost thought, his entire trustworthiness. As he calmly met her eyes with frank, open integrity of purpose, entire good-faith written on every line of his strongly-marked features, a faint, lovely glow stole over her own

face—an expression of deep content, of fervid hope, so brightening and glorifying it, that he felt with inward exultation to have called it forth was worth a far greater effort—was one of the joys worth living for.

Then, with a long-drawn breath of painful resolution, Rose said abruptly,

“You are right. It is at least worth trying. Only—” hesitatingly, with sudden paleness.

“Only what? Tell me all your fear,” he asked anxiously, disturbed by her sudden change of manner.

“I have a foolish fear for myself. It would not do for me to shrink, and yet I might mind it actually more than Clare.”

He looked perplexed over her dread, and pondered gravely before answering.

“I had not supposed you would necessarily share in the undertaking—”

“Clare would not be content otherwise. I do not at all object; only, the flesh is weak—” trying to smile bravely, but with a slight quivering of the lips he could not bear to see.

“I must find some excuse for sparing you—”

“No; you must not take advantage of my trusting you. For Clare’s sake I can bear anything;” and before he could speak again she left him, with

her usual light, quick step, to procure the pencil he required.

A moment later they were again with Mrs. Ashton, who eagerly extended her arm for the operation.

"Why not begin with Rose?" suggested Harry. "Clare could then better judge if she will really like it."

Frank's one glance of indignation at the speaker's cool selfishness in making this proposal was quite lost upon him, so unconscious was he of inflicting any trial upon the sister whose patient, self-sacrificing nature he had learned to believe could indeed "bear all things."

Rose, however, spoke with seeming indifference:

"That may be best. I am quite ready."

But Mrs. Ashton said petulantly,

"No. I am tired of waiting so long already. Let me be first."

With a finely-pointed pencil Frank carefully drew upon Mrs. Ashton's wrist a delicate wreath of buds and leaves; not failing to note, with a scarce suppressed smile, how the touch of his fingers, the guarded pressure of the pencil, seemed scarcely to be felt, so absorbed was she in watching, with a sort of childish delight, the graceful outlines which were forming so really pretty an ornament to her arm.

Then with a delicate brush he retraced the pattern, using a liquid, colorless at first, but which deepened as it combined with the pencil-mark into a faint, lovely blue. During this process Frank occasionally glanced curiously into her face to observe any indication of pain. At last she said meditatively,

"What a curious sensation! It feels like the least little sparkles of flame, and yet does not really burn!"

"It is not unlike very minute electric shocks," he replied quietly, "being produced by the combination of the fluid with the lead of the pencil. Will you have patience to endure this being repeated several times during the next few days? One application would soon fade out, if not deepened by repetitions."

"I quite like it," she rejoined, almost regretfully, as he released her arm from his grasp. "I am really sorry it is over. Sensations are always so disagreeable to me, I am rejoiced to find one that is pleasant."

In truth, her nerves were for the moment so utterly soothed and quieted, that, as she leaned back contentedly in her chair an expression of such painless repose came over her sweet face, that tears of positive rapture and gratitude filled Rose's

eyes. She ventured one glance of voiceless yet eloquent thanks towards Frank; while Harry bent delightedly over his wife, touching his lips lightly to her forehead, as he said,

"My darling, what a lucky fancy that was of yours! I shall promise your whims unlimited indulgence after this."

"As if you ever refused me anything!" she replied, with an upward glance in his face, still full of content.

"And now for Rose!" cried Harry gleefully. "O, I am tired!" observed Frank lazily; "let me rest awhile."

"Has it really tired you?" questioned Mrs. Ashton in surprise; while Rose shook her head disapprovingly at him, yet not having quite courage to make a positive remonstrance.

"Not very much," he answered, laughing a little; "only my clumsy fingers are unaccustomed to artistic efforts—"

"O, if that is all, please go on. I shall almost as much enjoy seeing Rose decorated."

Rose came quietly forward, taking a seat, which left her face partly turned away from Mrs. Ashton, and resolutely extended her arm towards Frank.

As he held her wrist with fingers that almost trembled, he asked softly,

"Must I?"

She only smiled her insistence, avoiding his look of entreaty, of deprecation.

As he resumed his pencil he observed quietly,

"Among the savages, as with civilized nations, Mrs. Ashton, a matron takes always precedence of a maiden, and wears the most elaborate ornaments. I must not outrage established etiquette by giving Miss Ashton such a bracelet as yours. Hers must be much more simple in design."

"Poor Rose!" said Mrs. Ashton, with mock pity, "when you are married, child, you must ask Mr. Hilton for another."

But Rose only looked gratefully in appreciation of his suggestion, and watched in a sort of fascinated horror the first dainty touches of his pencil.

She was so full of the preconceived idea of pain, that she scarcely observed how nearly imperceptible was the pressure of the pencil, or sufficiently recognized his thoughtfulness in keeping up a succession of humorous remarks, intended to distract her attention from the operation.

The color so entirely left her lips for an instant, when he took up the brush to retrace the simple scroll he had drawn, that he paused, in some perplexity, looking anxiously in her face, and clasping her wrist with an unconscious force which startled

her into more self-control. Comprehending his fear, she recalled bravely her fleeting strength, saying faintly,

"Go on !"

Gently letting her arm rest on the table, Frank rose abruptly, saying hastily,

"Wait a moment : these heavier lines need a different brush."

He was gone indeed but a moment, but it gave Rose time to regain her self-control; so that quite smilingly, on his return, she again held out her arm towards him.

As he followed the lines on her wrist with his brush, she presently observed, in some surprise,

"After all, it is not so very bad !"

"I thought you would like it," interposed Mrs. Ashton. "To me it was really soothing."

A faint suspicion crossed Rose's mind; but Frank looked so serenely unconscious of her questioning gaze, she soon dismissed it, adding with a sigh of relief, as the last touch was given.

"I wonder whether the evils we dread are always less bitter than we have imagined they would be."

"I think often they never occur," replied Frank, looking now almost weary, as he leaned back in his chair and contemplated the result of his labors.

"The greatest griefs always seem to me those of

which we have no warning. They crush like a thunder-bolt, from which there is no reviving."

Again that strange gloom and despondency crept over his face; and Rose, in pitying sympathy for a trouble she dared not question, sought with gentle words to win him back to brighter thoughts. She only partially succeeded, however; and soon, pleading some necessary writing, he left them, a little depressed by his apparent pain.

But the benefit of his experiment with Mrs. Ashton remained evident all the rest of that day.

CHAPTER IV.

MEANTIME the mountain-party was being very pleasantly accomplished. Mrs. Wayland readily persuaded Mrs. Bradford to accompany them, with the children; and the two ladies sat demurely and decorously together on the back seat of the carriage, leisurely discussing many abstruse mysteries of dress and of the toilet, while the children, in clamorous glee, were perched in front by Fred Maynard's side, who gave to their pranks and merriment all the attention he could spare from the spirited horses he was driving. Thus the mountains were quickly and uneventfully reached, while the day was still but slightly advanced, and the glittering dewdrops yet lingered in shaded recesses.

Leaving the carriage at a quiet farm-house, as far up the wooded slope, through which the road pleasantly wound, as they found driving entirely practicable, and granting to the children the honor for which they eagerly contended;—that of carrying the lunch-basket,—the little party were soon blithely scrambling up the steeper ascent, above which, on an elevated plateau, they proposed to rest

under the few trees which crowned the summit, enjoying the lovely view and the refreshing breezes.

Here they lounged in the delicious languor of well-earned repose, bidding the children amuse themselves in any way they fancied.

"But, Mamma," petitioned Arthur impatiently, "we are so dreadfully hungry!"

Lily did not speak; but fixed her large eyes with such imploring earnestness on her mother's face, that the whole party burst into laughter as Mrs. Bradford replied,

"You poor starved children! It is actually nearly two hours since breakfast! What shall we do?"—turning appealingly to the others.

"Let us all have lunch!" said Fred Maynard, beginning to unpack the basket. "To tell you the truth, I am not averse to a little refreshment myself."

"Nor I either," added Mrs. Wayland, springing up, with renewed animation. "It is astonishing how the drive and the purer, cooler air here give one an appetite."

In truth, the moderate supply of sandwiches and fruit, which had seemed so abundant immediately after a substantial breakfast and in the less exhilarating atmosphere below, disappeared now all too rapidly before their zealous attacks; and soon the children looked ruefully at the empty basket and

refolded napkins which precluded all hope of further refreshment till they should again reach home.

"Don't you think, Mamma!" timidly observed Arthur presently, seeing the others were again contentedly absorbed in the surrounding scenery, "don't you think the horses would be rested by the time—"

"Was ever such a boy?" interrupted Fred Maynard, laughing heartily. "Are you hungry still? Be off, you and Lily, and satisfy your ravenous appetites with blackberries and wild raspberries. There must be plenty of them close by, among the bushes."

"Only be careful, children!" interposed Mrs. Bradford somewhat anxiously, "do not go far, or get lost—"

"If you do," observed Mrs. Wayland, with affected indifference, "you know we shall have to go home without you; and the robins will cover you with leaves, like the children in the wood—"

Lily crept close to her mother's side at this, twining her little fingers closely round the hands in whose protecting power she felt such confidence, whispering in half-frightened tones:

"I do not care very much for the berries, Mamma; I would rather stay with you."

"Nonsense!" cried Arthur boisterously, affecting

even more boldness than he really felt. "Come with me, Lily, and I will bring you back safely."

"Go, my child!" said her mother, with a quiet, reassuring smile, tenderly kissing the timid, still hesitating little girl, and looking indulgently after both the children, as hand in hand they sauntered slowly away.

"I did not mean to really frighten poor Lily," half penitently observed Mrs. Wayland.

"O, the warning may do them some good," tranquilly returned Mrs. Bradford. "Arthur is always too heedless; and I must watch that they do not really wander away too far."

"Will you not come yourself for a ramble?" asked Fred Maynard.

"No, I think not! I am a little tired, and have brought a book I would like to finish. You two may go on a voyage of discovery, if you like, and tell me of your adventures afterwards. I should enjoy them more so than in actually sharing them."

Resisting a little languid persuasion from Mrs. Wayland, with demure gravity and covert amusement, Mrs. Bradford saw them depart at last, leaving her in charge of basket and shawls, near which, finding a comfortable seat, she was soon deeply absorbed in her book.

So entirely was she interested, that it seemed but

a few minutes, although really half an hour, when approaching voices made her look up. In extreme surprise she saw a party of complete strangers coming towards her, under the convoy of her own children, who, even in that brief, amazed glance, she could perceive wore a very demoralized appearance, with many disfiguring fruit-stains, not only on hands and faces, but on their clothes, which were also very much the worse for the evident scramble they had been enjoying.

Before she could speak or move, Arthur rushed impetuously forward, exclaiming,

“O, Mamma, we have had such a good time ! we had lots of berries, and then we met these people, who gave us some of their lunch—”

“Hush, Arthur !” whispered Mrs. Bradford reprovingly, while a flush of embarrassment and annoyance passed over her face as she arose and advanced courteously towards the strangers. “I must ask your indulgence towards my wild children,” she added gently. “I fear they have presumed very seriously on your kindness.”

“Do not be disturbed about it,” replied the elder lady of the party eagerly. “From what they told us, we felt we might dare to claim acquaintance with you. If your husband is the James Bradford

we knew, he must have spoken to you of Captain Headley, a friend of many years' standing."

A look of puzzled bewilderment, of faintly dawning recollection, stole over Mrs. Bradford's face as, after a moment's hesitation, she replied,

"I do remember the name, and yet very vaguely and uncertainly. Mr. Bradford speaks so seldom of his early life; and I knew him for so short a time before our marriage—"

"He and Captain Headley have not met or had any communication with each other for a number of years," replied the lady, with a little discomposure. "Our children," indicating them with a little wave of the hand, "were then almost as small as yours now are; and my husband, whose gray hairs are now so plentiful, was then in the very prime of life."

Feeling suddenly conscious how almost wanting in due courtesy had been her perplexed manner, Mrs. Bradford replied with greater cordiality,

"It is of course a very great pleasure to meet with you all here;" adding, as she acknowledged Mrs. Headley's gesture of introduction towards the others, "Are you staying in the neighborhood?"

"Only for a few days!" answered Mrs. Headley. "We have been wandering about vaguely for several weeks, seeking some place where we may fancy to

remain the rest of the summer. "Where are you?"

"At the Arlington House, down at Whitbury."

"Indeed! I have heard so much of that house! Is it pleasant? Can you recommend it?"

"We like it very much,"—a little more reservedly now,—"but tastes vary so."

"O, of course we should have to try it first. But who are these?" regarding curiously Mrs. Wayland and Fred Maynard, who now leisurely advanced towards them.

"Some friends who accompanied us here," replied Mrs. Bradford, sorely beset now with the perplexities of her position; wondering if she could escape without rudeness from presenting the self-introduced Headleys to her companions.

But the difficulty adjusted itself as Mrs. Wayland came eagerly forward, exclaiming,


"O, I am so glad you have met with friends! I so feared our prolonged absence would weary you."

Her words and look of undisguised curiosity and interest, as she surveyed the group before her, left no alternative to Mrs. Bradford. Briefly and hurriedly performing the introduction, so indirectly requested, she impatiently waited but a moment, while a few ceremonious remarks were being made,

before strongly urging their immediate return, professing great weariness, and a dread of encountering the mid-day sultriness.

A strange sense of discomfort, almost of impending evil, had come over her, from the first moment of meeting these unexpected strangers. Vague as were her first recollections of the name of Headley, there came crowding upon her memory now faint images of indefinite but distasteful associations awakened by it; and yet she could not quite admit, even to herself, that she positively remembered anything to their disadvantage. With restless impatience she listened to Mrs. Wayland's eager, voluble assurances to Mrs. Headley of her certainty that they would find Arlington House everything that was charming and delightful, and her expressed joy in the prospect of their coming thither speedily. She failed not also to mark the little widow's shy, pretty glances at the son just entering into manhood, whose evident admiration so delighted her, and even Fred Maynard's admiring glances and words, attracted by the fresh, girlish beauty of the daughter.

Mrs. Bradford's sense of responsibility deepened into a positive burden; and it was at last with almost grave displeasure that she called her children abruptly to her side, and, with a barely courteous



inclination of her head, hastily commenced the descent before her.

Reluctantly yielding to this indirect compulsion, Mrs. Wayland parted from her new acquaintances, with warm hand-clasps and earnest protestations of cordiality; while even Fred Maynard gave one regretful backward glance towards the pretty Kate, as he hurried to overtake Mrs. Bradford.

Once more seated in the carriage, and driving more slowly home, with their less impetuous steeds, under the glowing rays of a vertical sun, it seemed at first natural that the fatigue already undergone and the dry sultriness of the air should have subdued Mrs. Bradford, always so quiet and reserved, into such utter silence and depression. The children now shared the back seat with her; and Mrs. Wayland in front with Fred Maynard so vied with him in audacity of speech, making the echoes ring with her light laughter, that Mrs. Bradford's quietness continued unnoticed even by the children, who were too weary and sleepy to care for amusement now. The infection of silence was not unfelt in time even by the others; and so the buoyant party that went so gayly forth returned almost sadly.

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CHAPTER V.

THE Ashtons were detained by various circumstances within the seclusion of their own apartments during all that day, and did not even appear at dinner, as that repast was served in their sitting-room, in consequence of the presence of some friends from the neighborhood. An engagement of his own having prevented Frank Hilton from accepting an invitation to join this party, it was not until the next morning at breakfast that he could learn from Rose something of the result of his experiment.

"Your skill is really wonderful," she observed, in somewhat of an undertone, in reply to his inquiry. "Clare had some hours of refreshing sleep afterwards, and was unusually content and in good spirits throughout the evening. But one thing puzzles me,"—looking doubtfully at him as she hesitated a moment.

"You are fortunate," he answered demurely, but with a slightly quizzical tone, a faint, quickly subdued gleam of amusement in his eyes. "I find so many perplexing things in every day's experience,

I wonder you are disturbed by only one. May I know what it is?"

"You will tell me, I suppose, of some satisfactory way of accounting for it, but it is odd that Clare's bracelet remains almost as clearly defined as at first, while mine has nearly faded away."

A sudden flush suffused his face, and his eyes drooped for a moment before her clear, truthful gaze.

This man of the world, with all his varied experience, his diplomacy, his self-control, was confused and silenced before this simple, guileless girl. Even so innocent and well-intentioned a deception as the one he had initiated, he could not now continue, where an actual false assertion was needed. As he hesitated, she added quickly,

"Have you indeed been deluding us both?"

He answered humbly, deprecating the reproof he so shrank from.

"Forgive me! I could not bear to inflict the pain you only would have felt, and which would benefit no one."

A faint expression of disapproval subdued into momentary gravity her mobile features, and she remained silent, unable to quite excuse the deception she would not hastily condemn, in view of the thoughtful consideration which prompted it. At

the same moment Mrs. Wayland accosted her across the table, saying, with her usual vivacity,

"Dear Miss Ashton, we had such a charming time yesterday, and met such nice people! They were friends of Mrs. Bradford's, and are coming here."

"Indeed!" with courteous indifference of tone. "It was a lovely day for your drive."

"Have you, then, no curiosity about the strangers?" in tones of pique.

"Not very much, I must confess. I suppose I do not at all know them."

"But one is such a lovely girl!" interposed Fred Maynard with rather exaggerated enthusiasm.

"That I am really pleased to hear," replied Rose, with a demure smile.

"I don't see why," said Mrs. Wayland a little pettishly. "Not that I really think her so very pretty; she has so little manner or style."

"Who are they?" now asked Harry Ashton, looking up from his newspaper, with faint curiosity.

"Captain Headley and his family," eagerly replied Mrs. Wayland. "Mrs. Bradford knew them, or at least her husband did, years ago. Mrs. Headley is just delightful—so cordial and friendly, so full of life and sprightliness!"

I wonder you are disturbed by only one. May I know what it is ?”

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"I have been so impatient for your coming, Mr. Hilton. My bracelet is so lovely! and I have seriously feared its fading before you could repeat the operation, as you promised."

"It does, indeed, look very encouraging," he answered, bending over her wrist to observe the clearly defined lines, whose delicate blue contrasted so well with the rounded whiteness of her arm. "I have come quite prepared to repeat the process, if you feel equal to it."

"You forget how much I liked it!" with a momentary impatience. "I cannot comprehend Rose's silly dread of a sensation I so much enjoy. It seems really affected, when you remember how far more keenly sensitive are my nerves than hers."

"It is not a question of comparative sensitiveness," returned Frank quietly, as he arranged his materials on the table before him. "A difference of temperament often almost reverses the nature of sensations. For instance, with all your extreme susceptibility to external impressions, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to bring you under the influence of magnetism; while Miss Ashton would probably yield to it readily."

"Am I therefore of a weak and pliable nature?" questioned Rose a little wistfully.

"No; you have a very strong will—one that I

should not like to oppose," he answered earnestly yet half-playfully. "With greater physical strength—"

Again she checked him with a quick, almost imperious gesture, though unobserved by the others; and in penitent silence he addressed himself to the duty before him.

Satisfied now of the soothing effect upon Mrs. Ashton's nerves of this process, sometimes irritating almost beyond endurance, Frank prolonged it to the utmost, lingering over each dainty leaf and flower, adding artistic touches and delicate shading, till the deep silence, broken only by her regular breathing, warned him of the still greater triumph of his skill. She was sleeping sweetly and tranquilly as a child, wearing on her lovely features an expression of utter repose, of dreamless content, very charmingly replacing the air of pain and apprehension so habitual there.

Carefully, and with a womanly gentleness of touch, Frank let her arm rest upon her lap, and rose softly, with a gesture of silence towards the others as he noiselessly left the room.

With a scarcely perceptible pause of indecision, Rose quickly followed him, coming to his side as he stopped at a window not far from the entrance of their rooms, and saying timidly,

"Forgive me if I seemed this morning to reproach you : I was selfish and ungenerous to criticise such kindness—"

"Do not say that," turning upon her a look of sudden despondency; "I needed not to have marred the value of the service rendered to Mrs. Ashton in your eyes by even so trifling a deception. Her fortunate slumber has saved me from either explaining or repeating it this time. Tell me if I can make any amends now for it—if I am indeed pardoned."

"You magnify the offence absurdly," she answered warmly, "and I am ashamed of my own want of consideration. The deception was perhaps unavoidable, and I am too delighted with its good result to cavil at it. I have lately feared I am becoming painfully captious and irritable."

"Do not so accuse yourself," he replied earnestly. "In your guarded, innocent life you cannot understand how a man's perceptions become blunted, his conscience dulled, by the blows and buffets of the world's contests. If ever again that instinctive shrinking from evil, which so charms me, is aroused by word or act of mine—"

He paused, with a long-drawn breath of regret and resolution she was quick to feel, and just touching his hand with her slight, cool fingers, with-

drawn almost before he felt the light, trembling charm of their pressure, she answered softly,

"I, too, must be careful how I carelessly reproach you. I would not for the world have so hurt you! But tell me," added she, smiling now with cordial sweetness, "how did you so ingeniously delude me? Faintly suspecting you, as the process seemed so painless, I watched you closely, without discovering any difference."

"I wonder at that," with a look of relief at her brighter tone. "I needed but to change fluid as well as brush, when I left the room, to insure your immunity from the only really unpleasant part of the operation—that of having the two materials blended upon the flesh, already chafed by the pencil's pressure."

"Was that all? Well," a little meditatively, "I am glad you spared me, after all! Clare will not care now, and I am foolish about physical pain."

"You could not be otherwise, with that frail physique you so forbid my commenting on,—I wish you would tell me why."

A slight flush passed over her face, as she raised her eyes, after one instant's shrinking from the subject, and looked earnestly but somewhat sadly in his, which were bent upon her with questioning.

"May I indeed trust you?" she asked at last, overcome by a sudden longing for sympathy, fearing yet craving to better understand the daily increasing weakness she could not ignore.

Gently taking her hands, which she abandoned trustingly to his strong, earnest clasp, seeming to find in it both comfort and support, he replied simply,

"I think I already comprehend much of your trouble. Your tender, unselfish nature has been so absorbed in the care of others,—has felt so keenly every shock of pain or grief which has reached your own heart with redoubled force through those you love,—that, while no positive disease has brought professional skill to your aid, you yet have insensibly become decidedly in need of it."

Rose's usual paleness deepened perceptibly as he spoke, and her eyes were shyly averted, as though unable to bear the scrutiny of his kindly gaze. Then, collecting her failing courage, she answered, with a visible effort:

"I have tried to conceal this truth even from myself, but it faces me now too sternly for further denial—at least to you, who may aid me. I must, for Clare's sake and Harry's, find some way—"

"No," he interposed, almost severely; "say rather for the higher duty you owe yourself!

Never, for any human being, however dear, should such a sacrifice be made."

"Hush!" with a sudden tremor, and shrinking from his reproving tones. "Have patience with my weakness, and tell me only if you can help me—if you can give me again the strength and life which I feel are daily deserting me."

"Will you faithfully follow my directions, blindly, unquestioningly?"

She hesitated, looking entreatingly in his face. "You will not ask me to forsake my duty?"

"I will make no exception. You must trust me entirely, not imagining I will require any hard thing."

"I yield, then, unconditionally," with a faint, wistful smile. "I am too utterly weary to resist the will which promises such aid. But at least tell me why I am so strangely prostrated without any actual illness?"

"To you, who so clearly comprehend Mrs. Ashton's sufferings, who so tenderly bear with her terrible infirmity, I need only say there is a hyperæsthesia of the soul, a supersensitiveness of the spirit, far more intense than mere nervous disease can become, and far more exhaustive to the mortal frame. I do not fear to place this boldly before your eyes, because you are not wanting in moral

courage ; and you must intelligently aid the effort I propose to make in your service. Do you still fearlessly place yourself in my hands?"

She seemed scarcely to have understood his words, so calmly she remained in seeming meditation, no start or tremor revealing any shock to her consciousness. Then, looking up with a quiet smile, which actually confounded him with its sweet composure, she said, almost lightly,

"I think you are exaggerating my little ailments, to magnify your prowess in overcoming them. However, you shall have the amusement of trying your skill, and receive due honor for whatever success you achieve. Surely I can promise no more."

Intensely puzzled by her manner, her seeming indifference to his frank exposition of her condition, which he had half-feared would alarm her, he yet felt relieved that no apprehension was excited. Throwing himself therefore into her light mood, he answered cheerfully,

"Let me suggest, first of all, one little passing thought for my own comfort. Knowing no one here but yourselves and Maynard, who is always absorbed in the little widow—now what is the meaning of that smile?"

"I certainly will not tell you. It does not come

under the head of the symptoms you have claimed to investigate."

"I will find out, then. But to continue the appeal you so heartlessly interrupted: if you will do me one small personal favor—"

"Are you in earnest?" with a quick change of tone; "I fancied you were only jesting."

"Indeed no! I am in my intervals of leisure a very lazy fellow; and I want to find out all the odd, cosy nooks and corners, of which there must be such a variety here, where I can always find refuge from everything but my own thoughts. Will you not take pity on my ignorance and show me some of them?"

"Very gladly; but it is too warm now to venture far in the sun."

"True; but we will seek the nearest point of seclusion this time. The fact is I am dreadfully tired. If I might take a book and a cigar—"

"If you will promise not to light the cigar till I leave you."

"You do not like it, then?"

"I do not mind it very much; still—"

"You shall be indulged; I will take only a book and read to you, if you will."

"But I did not mean to stay—"

"Nay: you must give me fair opportunity to study this intricate case."

"I thought you already had mastered its difficulties," with a little mockery of tone.

"I want to see you more in repose. Please take some of the indispensable fancy-work ladies seem to find so convenient to play with,—I notice they never finish any of it,—and I will read of some soul-stirring theme which shall carry you breathlessly into very dreamland."

"Delightful! Yet I challenge you to success there."

"Have I not already said you would yield readily to magnetic influences?—and is not this an approach to that mysterious power?"

"You will not try to magnetize me?" with a look of troubled questioning now, subduing her previous sportiveness.

"Never!" with sudden deep gravity. "Magnetism is too mighty a force to be trifled with. How could I dare so cruel a hazard with you? Trust me, dear child, trust me! I would rather die than have the faintest injury reach you through me."

CHAPTER VI.

THE delicately shaded wools which formed Rose Ashton's ostensible occupation, while Frank Hilton lounged on the soft grass near by, idly reading aloud poetic fragments or chatting in an equally desultory fashion, made very slow progress towards being constructed into the ethereal wrap which was the aim of their present existence.

Rose was so accustomed to devote a forced and feverish energy to each hour's occupation, to be absorbed both physically and mentally in the burden of self-imposed duty in the service of others, that she faintly rebelled at first against the unwonted inaction now required of her. With a sense of chafing and irritation, she vainly strove at first to submit gracefully and pleasantly to it ; but the weary pain of her mind could not remain unperceived by the keen vision which so closely watched each impatient movement, each despondent sigh. Seeming, however, to ignore them, Frank professed a deep interest in her work ; entreated, with eager curiosity, to be shown the complicated stitches which her crochet-needle accom-

plished to his declared bewilderment, inducing her even to intrust the fairy-like fabric to his unskilled fingers, while he puzzled over its intricacies.

Gradually the faint shade disappeared from her brow, returning animation sparkled in her eyes, and her hitherto enforced smile deepened into actual merriment over his absurd blunders.

"You laugh very unmercifully," he cried, in assumed wrath; "and yet would you be less awkward in first essaying some more masculine accomplishment? Could you, for instance, display the same true and delicate touch, in which you so excel me here, at the billiard-table?"

"I am not sure," she answered demurely. "I tried once or twice to play billiards with Harry, without very much success, it is true; but it is not probably harder than croquet."

"Will you let me witness your skill by and by? It is so long since I have played billiards myself, we should not be unequally matched."

"If Clare can spare me," with doubt and hesitation of both tone and manner.

"She will not need you for hours," with tranquil arbitrariness; "and you owe me some consideration, I think; am I not worn out in your service and hers?"

"You don't look very seriously used up."

"I am, nevertheless, desperately weary of this last enterprise. My fingers are all cramped trying to hold that tiresome implement, and my nerves on edge with the worry of learning such a stitch."

"Poor soul!" she cried, with mock sympathy, taking her work out of his hands, and composedly going on with it herself; "you must have some rest after such immense exertions."

"No, I will not be so selfish: I will read to you, if you like; I fancy I shall shine more in that line."

"Do you know," with a dreamy effort at recollection, letting her hands droop idly in her lap as she spoke, "I do not think ever in my life I have had any one to read to me. It will be a novelty at least."

His eyes dwelt with deep commiseration on this girl, so young and lovely, so susceptible of deep impressions, so keenly sensitive, whose whole life had been one long effort to contribute to the ease and comfort of others, never once awakening any reciprocation of her loving care, never once suggesting the thought that she too had mental and spiritual needs, crying voicelessly for the aliment none thought of supplying.

His voice took a deeper, tenderer tone as he read portions of Campbell's "Pleasures of Hope,"

so selected as to avoid the subtle excitement some of its noble passages might have produced, and aiming only to cheer and elevate her easily depressed spirits. He read well, with a musical, sympathetic voice, and as she listened with breathless interest, intensely absorbed by the glowing words, so perfectly rendered, carried away by the inspiration of their exalted tenor, her whole being seemed transformed and glorified. Fixing upon him an earnest gaze, of whose ardent force she was utterly unconscious, in which her very soul seemed to be absorbed, with slightly parted lips, and faintly flushed features, she presented now, as he ventured one quick glance towards her, a glowing beauty he had not dreamed of beholding.

Dreading the reaction after any prolonged excitement, even when so intensely pleasurable, Frank gently closed his book presently, with a faint sigh of regret that he must relinquish the deep gratification of so intrinsically that pure and spiritual being. He dared not trust his voice in speech for a moment ; and it was Rose who broke the deep silence at last, saying in subdued accents of utter content, of dreamy pleasure,

“How beautiful is all that poem, and how well you read it ! You gave it an entirely new charm.”

“Poetry should always be read aloud,” he an-

swered, in guarded accents, "especially to an appreciative audience."

"You are sure of that with me," she replied, smiling gently, as she essayed to resume her work, only to let it fall again from her languid fingers; and she added with a faint air of uneasiness, as she leaned back wearily, "but I fear it is not good for me: I feel so strangely unnerved."

Startled for a moment, Frank looked anxiously in her downcast face, taking her hands in his with a gentle, soothing touch, as he spoke cheerfully, seeming not to notice her quivering lips, or the tears which faintly showed in her eyes.

"Nay, the 'Pleasures of Hope' ought rather to strengthen and inspire you; still, Campbell writes always a little sadly. There is a strain of pathos which pervades all his poems that to me is very sweet, but to you is perhaps depressing. Will you give me another lesson in crochet now, or shall we go to the billiard-room?"

With a slight gesture of impatience she withdrew her hands from the firm clasp which seemed so to steady her nerves, and faintly smiled as she replied,

"Is it not too warm for billiards now? We should have to cross all that sunny slope, where there is not one tree to subdue the glare."

"Well, then," with apparently unwilling submis-

sion, "is it permitted in this establishment to gather flowers *ad libitum*?"

"I suppose so," in a tone of surprise. "Do you care for flowers so much?"

"Not really much. Only there are some lovely rosebuds up there on the trellis I have a fancy for; most likely because they are out of reach. What do you think about it?"

"You do not really call that out of reach!"

"It would necessitate a scramble, for which I feel too indolent just now. If you could only get them."

"What an unconscionable request! I could not—I certainly will not—so indulge your laziness."

"How hard-hearted you are! Well, I must have them," looking up with indolent deliberateness for a moment; and then springing suddenly to his feet, with an activity of movement he had not seemed capable of an instant before, he raised himself with one hand on the trellis sufficiently to catch and drag down the whole spray of roses and buds, which he had coveted. Throwing himself again at Rose's feet with an ostentatious sigh of profound weariness, Frank addressed himself leisurely to removing the prettiest buds and leaves; lingering daintily over the operation, fastidiously selecting or rejecting them, as his wayward fancy

seemed capriciously to dictate. Rose watched him at first with faint amusement ; presently remonstrating seriously with his arbitrary rejection of roses which he insisted were too nearly in full bloom ; and quite interested at last, as he proceeded to arrange deftly and with a true artistic taste those he had preserved into a lovely little bouquet. As he finally offered it for her acceptance with an exaggerated air of humble gallantry, he observed with subdued satisfaction how entirely she had recovered from her nervous agitation.

After some moments of nonsensical argument, in which Rose's restored vivacity was clearly evident, and some very slowly added stitches to her work, Frank yielded to her earnest persuasion, and read aloud more briefly, and with less fervent enthusiasm, further passages of the same poem ; feeling he must accustom her more gradually to this pleasure till she could find in it a calmer enjoyment.

Thus fleetly and imperceptibly the hours flew by, and Rose started up with some trepidation as the arrival of the heavy lumbering stage, which was due at mid-day, proclaimed the lateness of the hour. As she hastily gathered up her work, resisting all Frank's entreaties for even a few minutes more of idleness, Rose said carelessly,

"I suppose the stage brings us new arrivals ; pro-

bably the strangers Mrs. Wayland was speaking of this morning."

His utter silence caused her to turn in surprise to where he stood, pale and stern, striving to control and conceal an evidently painful emotion. Not connecting it at all with her lightly uttered words already half forgotten, Rose approached him with looks of startled sympathy, saying,

"What is it, Mr. Hilton? Are you ill?"

He struggled desperately for composure, as he answered brokenly with ashen lips,

"It is nothing!—at least, only a sudden shock, which—crushes me."

The strong man actually trembled and writhed for a moment under the anguish he was enduring; while Rose in speechless pain stood regarding him with eyes of deepening sadness. With gathering courage, at last he resumed his usual calmness, saying quietly,

"Forgive me, Miss Ashton. I must have frightened you."

"Do not think of that," she answered earnestly; "only tell me what troubles you. Can I do nothing?"

"Dear child, no. The story of my suffering is not fit for your gentle hearing. It is a long, silent, deeply buried grief of the past, that I thought I had

forever put out of my sight, which comes now like an awful specter to trouble my peace."

He spoke with a certain wildness of expression in his eyes, which might well have alarmed her gentle spirit; but with friendly warmth she replied,

"I will not ask you to make any unwilling revelation; only take comfort in remembering all your thoughtful kindness to others, the warm friendships you have inspired. What memory of the past can efface the good deeds of the present?"

"It has not been with entirely pure hands that I have come out of that bitter conflict," he replied gloomily. "Under the chafing of a cruel wrong, pursued by a remorseless grief, I have not been quite unstained by passion. The memory of my own impatient rage stabs me now as cruelly as that of wrongs endured."

She hesitated, scarcely knowing, in her pitying gentleness, how to minister to this mind diseased; but presently she took courage to say,

"Surely you must exaggerate this pain, and cherish too keenly a regret so inconsolable. It cannot be right thus to suffer, where one brave effort would cast off such morbid sorrow."

"I must seem weak indeed, if you can say this," he moodily rejoined; "and yet I have been cheerful

and patient enough till I have come again face to face with this bitter trial. Why, out of all other places in this wide world, must they come to this one little place of refuge I had found so sweet?"

"Whom do you mean? Is it the Headleys you so dread?" asked Rose, gravely startled by his words.

"Did you not understand that?" with impatient irritation. "How can I meet them, amongst all these curious people, knowing how quickly the story I so shudder to think of will be bandied from mouth to mouth, a spicy morsel of gossip for their eager ears?"

"If I knew—" she began deprecatingly, "I cannot believe you have any real cause for self-reproach. Even if these people come, need you meet them beyond the most formal and distant encounters? Think of Harry's friendship, of the aid you are giving Clare, and even of this pleasant morning you have bestowed on me! Be brave, and face it all resolutely."

Soothed and cheered in spite of himself by her cordial sweetness, her simple suggestions of comfort, Frank looked long and earnestly into the depths of her pure eyes, which met his with such innocent fearlessness, such trusting faith. With a long-drawn breath of resolution, he asked presently,

"And you ! When you hear the garbled, distorted account I so shrink from, will your dear faith still endure ? Will you not tremble and turn away, perhaps regarding me with a divine pity, but not unmingled with horror ?"

"Never !" she cried, warmly now. "Even your own lips could never persuade me you merited such treatment."

"Even if you never hear the truth ?—if I leave their slanders unanswered ?"

"Is it not the best way to meet slander ?"

"Perhaps not always; but in this case it is the only course I can pursue. I must talk it over with Harry when I can. Meantime," looking at her with an air of despondency, "have I undone all the good I aimed at, for you ? Are you again wearied with this new claim on your sympathies ?"

"No, indeed. A few moments of excitement cannot destroy all the repose and content of these bright hours. I do not know when I have felt so strong and composed."

The comfort of her words to his overwrought mind was singularly great, seeming to his excited fancy an intimation of its acceptance as an atonement for former errors ; and with a look of almost hopefulness, he braced himself to encounter firmly

the approaching struggle, as he walked quietly by Rose's side towards the house.

Seeking, however, the side entrance whence they had issued, and going directly to their rooms, which were in a different part of the house from those which, being still vacant, would only be shown to the new-comers, nothing suggested as yet what might be their actual identity.

Parting from Rose at his own door, declining with a weary sigh her entreaty that he should re-join their party for a while, Frank addressed himself to calmly review his position, and to fill it courageously.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN the assembled guests of the house gathered that evening round the dinner-table Frank's vacant place by her side painfully disturbed Rose. Whatever bitterness this encounter might have for him, however poignant might be the unwelcome recollections thus awakened, she felt it was a mistaken weakness to yield thus to what she, perhaps severely, stigmatized as a cowardly, an unworthy terror.

Scarcely, however, had these thoughts passed through her mind, when, before any comment or question could be put in words by the sprightly, inquisitive Mrs. Wayland, who was glancing curiously across the table, Hilton's usual quiet, composed step brought him duly to his place.

Rose ventured one look into his pale, grave face, as he responded briefly to her greeting; beholding in mingled sadness and pleasure the traces visible, perhaps only to her eyes, of the deep suffering of these past hours, still faintly showing through the

steady calmness, the subdued glow which told of conquered weakness, of conscious strength. At the same instant, while her own lips were silent from strong feeling, from a sympathy too deep for utterance, as

“Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,”

Mrs. Wayland exclaimed, with merry archness,

“How could you so torment us by coming so late, Mr. Hilton? Was the delay intentional, to make your arrival the greater sensation?”

“Is it not necessary to pause and be sure one is fortified at every point before venturing into your presence?” he asked with a smile, whose veiled mockery she did not detect.

“Oh, Mr. Hilton, what a pretty speech!” she cried in pleased surprise; adding coquettishly, “yet I do not think I am so formidable.”

“Add but one more to your fatal list of charms,” he replied, in the same light tone, “and I should at once surrender at discretion.”

“That were indeed a triumph,” interposed Fred Maynard, with barely concealed annoyance. “Shall I anticipate your wishes, Hilton, and change places at the table with you?”

“Certainly not; let me at least face my fair foe, in one faint hope of resistance.”

"Nay ; you will not find me so aggressive," half pouted Mrs. Wayland. "However willingly I may accept your homage, I will not demand it."

"By the bye, Frank," observed Harry Ashton, coming good-naturedly to his friend's rescue, fancying this badinage annoyed him, "have you seen the new-comers yet?" directing his attention, as he spoke, by a glance, towards the further end of the long table.

"No," said Frank slowly, in tones whose sudden huskiness warned Rose of the moment's pain, while he bravely turned his eyes in the direction indicated. At that instant the intervening form of a waiter bending down to speak to Mrs. Bradford, beyond whom the strangers were seated, fortunately prevented the recognition Frank dreaded, even while seeming to provoke it. Withdrawing his glance, with a faint sigh of relief for the moment's respite, he added quietly,

"Do you know who they are?"

"Not their names yet," replied Harry carelessly. "One is a fine, soldierly man in appearance, whose wife, as I suppose the stout lady to be, has animation, or fussiness, as I would call it, enough for both, which would account for his silence."

"But the girl is really lovely," interposed Fred Maynard.

"She is such a child," impatiently observed Mrs. Wayland, with a slight frown of vexation.

"Not more so than the brother you think so handsome," retorted Fred Maynard maliciously.

The fair widow flushed with annoyance, as she turned away from Maynard, saying with more gentleness to Harry Ashton,

"They are the Headleys, whom we met yesterday on our drive. Mr. Bradford knows them."

"He did not seem very glad to see them," replied Harry, laughing a little. "I saw him shake hands rather pleasantly with the husband, but he looked like a thunder-cloud trying to smile when the wife accosted him so eagerly."

"Are you sure we have never met them anywhere, Harry?" asked Mrs. Ashton languidly. "I have observed them looking this way several times with curious intentness, as though they fancied they knew us."

"I am quite sure not only their faces but their names are entirely strange to me," replied Harry; adding with a roguish glance towards Frank, and never dreaming his intended joke could inflict the staggering blow, whose effect could not be quite concealed, even with all the force his friend sought to exert, "Perhaps it is Frank who so attracts their wandering glances."

Quite naturally the eyes of all the little group, who had been discussing the Headleys, were turned merrily, yet with varied expressions, upon Frank at this suggestion. As he faced this formidable battery of glances he could not prevent a sudden paleness, while all light died out of his eyes, and he remained for one instant utterly dazed and silenced. Then, with quick courage, he raised his head, and looked brightly upon them all, with a cheerfulness of expression which Rose watched with positive admiration, and then, carelessly, with courteous, almost smiling demeanor, he said,

"It is quite possible they recognize me, if it is the family I once knew of that name. Have you yet exhibited your bracelet to your friends, Mrs. Ashton?" he added, turning to her as he spoke.

"Your bracelet!" cried Mrs. Wayland, with all her usual vivacity, "Has Mr. Hilton brought you some magnificent trophy from the East? Oh do let me see it!"

"In this light you can scarcely see it across the table," replied Mrs. Ashton, with pleased interest, as she indicated by a gesture, the wrist whose delicate adornment was indeed only faintly visible.

"But what is it?" persisted the fair widow, in some perplexity.

"A new and somewhat civilized form of tattooing," said Frank Hilton, amused at her bewilderment.

"Tattooing!" she exclaimed, recoiling in exaggerated horror; "how could Mrs. Ashton bear it?"

"Oh, it was not at all painful," serenely replied Mrs. Ashton. "I quite liked it, and it is really very pretty. You must see it more closely after dinner."

"But will it not fade or wear off?" with a nervous shudder as she spoke.

"Mr. Hilton says it will last a long time," interposed Harry Ashton. "In the savage world, where these practices prevail, it is the highest, most delicate compliment that can be offered, thus to adorn the fair one most admired by the artist."

"But what a shame for Mr. Hilton to offer that tribute here, to a married woman!" protested Mrs. Wayland, pitiably divided by her irrepressible coquetry and her real shrinking from the imagined pain of the operation.

"How could I dare thus to decorate one who may yet become the captive of another's bow and spear?" retorted Frank quizzically.

Thus in light, desultory conversation the hour of dinner passed, so long and wearisome to those whose

gayety was but assumed, so brief and fleeting to the majority.

Imperceptibly, except to Rose's pained observation, Frank subsided at moments into utter silence, seeming to seek an instant's breathing space, wherein to brace himself for the coming struggle—to summon his scattered forces for fresh efforts.

Rose was herself unusually quiet, speaking only in compelled response to the many remarks which were addressed to her, save for a few earnest words of veiled sympathy which she could find occasion to utter, for Frank's understanding only, while of seemingly trifling import.

As they left the table at last, and many gathered round Mrs. Ashton in the parlor to examine and admire her new ornament, Frank, beholding the approach of the Headley party, turned abruptly to his friend, saying in low, pleading tones,

"For Heaven's sake, Harry, help me to get away from all these people. I want your counsel and aid very seriously, dear old fellow."

Gravely startled by his words and manner, yet quick to comprehend how urgent was this claim upon his friendship and good offices, Harry, without one word, put his arm through Frank's, and they sauntered out upon the piazza, and into the shaded gloom under the trees beyond.

"What is it, Frank?" he asked; then, warmly, "You look dreadfully cut up."

"You may have guessed before, Harry," he replied, with a groan he could not repress, "that there was a dark memory in the past I dared not awaken. That bitter, nameless horror I have suffered terribly only to remember, comes now to me face to face again. How can I meet it?"

And breaking suddenly away from his friend, he threw himself on a seat, burying his face in his hands in utter abandonment of despair.

"Cheer up, Frank!" warmly cried Harry Ashton, gently drawing his friend's hands away and holding them in his own strong, faithful grasp. "You have too many true friends to give way so weakly to despair. Tell me this grief that so troubles you; and trust me, I will find comfort for you somewhere, even were it your own wrong-doing you have to reveal, which I do not believe."

The usually careless, good-natured Harry Ashton, roused now from his wonted indifference by Frank Hilton's evident misery, spoke with an earnestness which of itself conveyed a suggestion of comfort.

With a weary sigh, Frank again rose, and taking his friend's arm, paced for a moment *silently by his side* still further into the gathering

darkness, as he nerved himself for the narrative, whose every word was a bitter pain.

"You remember, Harry," he commenced, at last, abruptly, "how we parted ten years ago, and you left me on the steamer, on my first going abroad. Before that day's sun had set I was insensibly but surely falling into the clutches of the Headleys. Remember that I was only twenty; a mere boy, full of the joy of living, dreaming ardently of future success, warm-hearted, enthusiastic, innocent of all evil, and—God help me!—having a faith in humanity I have never known since."

He paused, with a despondent look, an air of uncontrollable remorse, at which Harry interposed, with an effort at cheeriness,

"You are wrong there, Frank. All the evil you could possibly have encountered should never make you forget the many who are still pure and true-hearted."

"Wait till you know what my trial has been," gloomily answered Frank. "You do not know the Headleys. Let me describe the family party as I then found it. Captain Headley, even then no longer young, had at that time, as now, a singularly imposing appearance. Tall and commanding, with an air of great intelligence, of noble frankness, no one could have guessed or readily

believed the mental weakness he could for a while successfully conceal beneath so attractive an exterior. It amounted, in fact, to an actual deficiency of character and principle, which left him entirely under the control of a wife whose unscrupulous ability knew no restraint or limit. Besides the younger children now with them, there was a young girl, Captain Headley's daughter by a former wife, a lovely, fragile creature, inheriting all her father's fatal weakness; of whom the unloving stepmother even vaguely hinted at positive mental disease—less to me, however, than to others. The poor girl's loneliness and want of amusement were skillfully suggested to me: I was constantly asked to look after her when on deck, to walk with her, to amuse her when the weather confined her to the cabin, while Mrs. Headley was apparently engrossed with the constant care of her own children. Agnes herself often would seek me, showing so openly her pleasure in my society, seeming perfectly guileless and unsuspecting of wrong in thus betraying her innocent preference. I had been less than a man could I have slighted or rebuffed her. But I give you my word, Harry, I never dreamed of trifling unworthily with her child-like regard. Nor do I now believe any stronger feeling would have been awakened in her, but for the

devilish maneuvering of the heartless woman who dared to call herself her mother. And so, without suspicion or warning, I fell into the snare thus ingeniously set for me. Imagine my horror and repugnance when, before many days had passed, I found myself called to account by these unnatural parents, who were willing even to force this poor girl upon my reluctant hands, only for the sake of being relieved from her claim to be supported out of their moderate means."

"But you did not yield!" cried Harry indignantly; "surely even then you knew enough of the world—"

"What could I do?" groaned Frank. "Was I not helpless in their hands? All had been so skillfully managed, I saw myself held up before all the passengers as a cruel, dishonorable trifle if I hesitated. Agnes and I had been so constantly together,—no one knowing how little each interview had been of my seeking; my seemingly devoted attentions so ingeniously pointed out, and widely commented on; the girl's evident partiality, so unguardedly revealed by herself, so carefully suggested by this fiendish woman—what could I do but yield? Not to the father's pretended threats, however, or to his wife's sophistry, her tearful entreaties that I should not break her dear

Agnes' heart. It was the simple, actual truth that the girl did love me, did look, in child-like confidence, for the result she had been taught to expect, which confounded and overpowered me."

"And so you married her," pityingly observed Harry, profoundly affected by this recital.

"Would to God I had!" cried Frank, with a sudden burst of remorseful anguish. "No, Harry, the darkest part of my story is yet to come. Thus far I had been only weak, but the time came when impatient anger hurried me into the error which must be a lifelong regret and misery to me."

Pausing an instant to regain his self-control, he proceeded, more calmly:

"Our engagement was eagerly and officiously announced by the delighted parents, and even in the brief season of an ocean voyage, accepted as a natural event by the passengers, who took a mild but kindly interest in its occurrence. Agnes, poor child, was so openly and guilelessly happy, so contented with the mere shadow of regard I could contrive to assume, that I flattered myself that at least I only could be a sufferer, and even dreamed at times of gradually becoming sincerely attached to the girl, whose sweet innocence deserved a better fate. But they were not content to wait for such a result. We had nearly reached our destination, late

one evening, and knew the early morning would find us in all the tumult of landing. A little impatient of my bonds, wondering restlessly how far they would be made to fetter my intended movements, I was moodily pacing the deck, dreaming idly of all sorts of impossibilities over my cigar, when the hated sound of Mrs. Headley's soft, plausible voice came abruptly upon me, as I had not noticed her approach in the semi-darkness which surrounded me. I cannot repeat that conversation, Harry—I cannot even recall it without a shudder of renewed horror. Suffice it that her grasping nature had still another sacrifice to demand. Perhaps she feared I might regain my freedom if once out of her sight. At any rate, the requirement, although less forcibly worded, was that I should marry Agnes at once. I must not condemn the poor girl to the anguish of an uncertain separation, she said—meaning I must take the burden of her support and care from their unwilling hands. In bitter resentment and wrath, I spoke strongly, in unguarded tones, as I vehemently refused to comply. In my passionate anger I never thought who might overhear me; and having, to my relief, completely silenced the scheming woman by my indignation, I hastily left her, to seclude myself in my own stateroom from further

distasteful importunity. As I did so, a confused outcry, a sudden excitement, attracted my attention for a moment, and arrested my steps. There were some hurried inquiries, some lights carried hastily to and fro, and then one of the officers spoke laughingly to another about a false alarm—a lady's shawl had gone overboard; and I went on to my room. Harry, I cannot tell you—I have never known exactly what happened: only a sailor had fancied he heard a faint cry, and saw something white floating for an instant on the water; but it was so dark, and no one seemed missing, and so no search was made; but next morning Agnes was—gone!"

He again hid his face in his hands with a bitter groan.

"My poor Frank!" uttered Harry tenderly. "It was very terrible. But why should you reproach yourself with so unfortunate an accident?"

"If I could only be sure it was even an accident!" cried Frank remorsefully; "but remembering my wrathful words to Mrs. Headley, when, as it would seem, Agnes must have been near enough to have overheard them; learning thus at last the deception I had been weak enough to share in, the dread thought haunts me always, that she may even have thrown herself into the water."

"And you have never known more?" asked Harry, after some moments of grave silence.

"Never! A vigorous search was made, hoping to recover her body, as we were then almost at the wharf, but without effect. Nor was this vindictive woman content with the evil thus far wrought. A cruel exaggerated story was blazoned far and wide of my having won Agnes' love only as a pastime of the voyage; of my violent refusal to fulfill my engagement, having driven the poor girl to commit suicide. I went forth into the world, with the brand of Cain upon my brow; shunned and looked upon coldly everywhere that the tale could be carried by the industrious zeal whose victim fate had made me. Since then years of wandering have taught me patience and resignation. I have come home at last, hoping for peace and comfort among my own people; and even here mine enemy has found me out. The cruel slanders she will revive I know too well. I have but to consider, shall I endure or fly them?"

"Neither, Frank, neither!" cried Harry energetically. "That woman's bitter tongue is powerless among your friends. She may not even dare one malicious utterance, when forbearance is so manifestly her wisest course; but if she is so impolitic as to attack you, be brave, and meet her with the *silent scorn* she merits."

"If she were only not a woman," muttered Frank passionately, "could I with any conscience make her husband responsible—"

"Would not that control her?"

"I think not; and it would not be right. I am so weak—such a mere tool in her hands. I know if he has ever understood the part she made me play."

"There remains, then, nothing but a manly inaction for you, till some aggressive movement is made by her. Courage, Frank! she may leave you unassailed. If not, we will join forces against her. Fly you certainly shall not. Be sure that no right-minded person will ever regard this story as containing any reflection upon your honor or integrity."

"I am a very coward, nevertheless," said Frank, evidently a good deal comforted and relieved by his friend's sensible words.

"You have cherished this idea until you have become weak and morbid, losing all your own strength of mind and character, as well as common sense, under its influence. Come along to your own rooms, old fellow, where Clare and Rose will be by this time, and we will drive all this nonsense out of your foolish head."

CHAPTER VIII.

As the Headley party approached the group gathered around Mrs. Ashton, Rose glanced curiously at them, wondering if she could escape an introduction to which she felt such decided repugnance. The hope was vain, however. Mrs. Wayland eagerly welcomed them, and officiously presented them to all the party as her own personal friends; thus forcing the acquaintance upon all who would not willingly offend the frivolous but harmless little widow.

Mr. Bradford very markedly drew his wife away, after bestowing the slightest possible attention upon Mrs. Headley's eager address; and Rose, observing this, wondered at it, and was dreamily speculating as to the cause of such evident coldness, when her attention was attracted by Mrs. Wayland's answer to some question of Mrs. Headley's.

"Nearly opposite me? Oh, that must have been Mr. Hilton! I will introduce him—where is he?" looking around eagerly as she spoke.

Some one had seen him go out with Harry Ashton, and said so. In smooth tones, suggestive of the Psalmist's description of the treacherous friend, "The words of his mouth were softer than butter, having war in his heart; his words were smoother than oil, and yet be they very swords," Mrs. Headley remarked,

"It matters not. We knew Mr. Hilton formerly abroad; and although he has changed a good deal, I was pretty sure I recognized him at the table."

"O, do tell us something about him!" cried Mrs. Wayland eagerly. "He is so grave and quiet, and has so little to say, when he must have all sorts of wonderful adventures he could tell."

"You must not expect me to reveal what he wishes to keep back," answered Mrs. Headley, with apparently jesting carelessness.

The shaft found its mark, however; and Mrs. Wayland pressed more closely to Mrs. Headley's side as she cried in heedless curiosity,

"But that is just what I want to hear. It must be something delightfully interesting."

"Nay," with affected reluctance. "Let Mr. Hilton tell his own adventures. He might not thank me for the relation."

Rose had turned coldly away immediately after the enforced introduction Mrs. Wayland had ac-

complished; but at these words she paused, saying in grave reproof,

"Is not that always the safest course? People usually understand best their own affairs."

The words, uttered so apparently at random, brought a sudden flush to Mrs. Headley's cheek as she answered, with great sweetness,

"You are quite right, Miss Ashton, and it pleases me so much to have you approve of my reserve. Our knowledge of Mr. Hilton involves such a sad story, I should not indeed have courage to tell it."

"How cruel to disappoint us so!" exclaimed Mrs. Wayland pettishly. "Why should you so seek to silence Mrs. Headley, Miss Ashton?"

"I have not had any such intention," replied Rose, trying not to show the annoyance she felt at this. "If Mrs. Headley finds any wisdom in my passing remark, I am very pleasantly complimented, of course."

And without waiting for further discussion of so distasteful a subject, she walked quietly away to where Mrs. Ashton was uttering a few tranquil parting words to Mrs. Bradford.

Turning by a sudden impulse to Mr. Bradford, Rose asked earnestly,

"It seems you knew these Headleys formerly. What sort of people are they?"

"Not at all to my taste," he replied, a little shortly. "Take a friend's advice, Miss Ashton, and keep out of their way all you can."

"Thank you for the warning. It quite accords with my own preconceived notions. I felt a little interested in the girl, however. She is so pretty and shy."

"Pretty—yes," as though making an unwilling concession. "How far her shyness may be assumed remains to be discovered. There was another daughter once—"

"Come, Rose, are you ready?" interrupted Mrs. Ashton placidly, taking her sister-in-law's arm, regardless as usual of any one's wishes save her own, and only intent now on reaching her own room at once. "I am sure Mr. Hilton is waiting for us, with Harry, by this time."

As Rose complied without a word, notwithstanding her desire to have heard a little more about the new-comers' strange history, Mr. Bradford turned to his wife, saying in an undertone as they also left the room,

"I am glad I was interrupted. I came very near making a confounded fool of myself, raking up that old story, which I wish I could forget."

As Rose Ashton passed beyond hearing after her last words to Mrs. Wayland, Mrs. Headley

looked after her for a moment, with an expression whose veiled malignity did not quite escape Fred Maynard as he stood near, curiously observing this scene.

It was, however, in still suave and gentle tones that Mrs. Headley asked,

"Who is Miss Ashton? She seems a very lovely girl, with such delightful force and originality of character."

"If she had more animation she would be the belle of the house," replied Mrs. Wayland honestly. "But the reserve and seclusion consequent on her sister's ill-health prevent our becoming at all intimate."

"Are they the Ashtons of Washington, do you know?"

"I am not sure. Mr. Maynard can tell you, perhaps," replied Mrs. Wayland, in some surprise.

"Of Washington?—yes," he said, in reply to her appealing look; "have you known them there?"

"Not personally," answered Mrs. Headley carelessly, "but I have understood they occupy a high position, and are very wealthy."

"They seem to be," he answered indifferently as he walked away, somewhat chafed, with even his good-nature, by this discussion.

"She is certainly very charming," murmured Mrs. Headley thoughtfully.

"That seems to be the general opinion," observed Mrs. Wayland impatiently; "but do tell me more of Mr. Hilton. He is so handsome and interesting."

"I do not think I have anything to tell," replied Mrs. Headley cautiously. "Some time when I have refreshed my recollections, perhaps;—it was so long ago that I knew him. Do not urge me now, dear Mrs. Wayland, especially as my boy Robert is looking this way so longingly, and seems inclined to reproach me for monopolizing you so entirely. Take pity on his admiration, and be less chary of your smiles, sweet friend, while I consign you to his care."

Beckoning her son to take her place by Mrs. Wayland's side, and directing him by a gesture to offer his arm to the pretty young widow, who seemed such a frolicsome child by his sturdy young manhood, Mrs. Headley watched them meditatively for a moment as they sauntered towards the piazza, where the moon's first faint rays were dispersing the obscurity, saying softly to herself,

"That foolish little thing will do well enough for a beginning; but I must try to win Miss Ashton for Robert. She would be a prize indeed, with *her* wealth and position; and yet I feel already

in my heart that I almost hate her haughty, independent ways. Imagine her daring to suggest to me how or what I should speak!—and of Frank Hilton, above all! I wonder has she any fancy there. I must take care to meet that difficulty promptly.”

Thus musing, yet with flashing eyes as she recalled Rose’s intrepid reproof, Mrs. Headley took the arm of her husband, who waited silently near, with a look of irresolution on his handsome face, seeming to have no thought or will, save in obedience to his wife’s masterful dictation. Together they walked in apparent aimlessness through the rooms, till at length they caught sight of their daughter, comfortably ensconced in a corner of the piazza with Fred Maynard. Her air of guileless simplicity was really refreshing to her companion, whose usual *blasé* manner had quite disappeared before the magic of the girl’s frankly admiring glances, her flushed cheeks, and earnestly clasped hands.

At some distance Robert was wandering through the shrubbery with Mrs. Wayland; and so, quite content with the evening’s success, and having no other laurels to hope for, in the absence of Frank Hilton and the Ashtons, Mrs. Headley tranquilly retired, leaving the young folk to themselves.

CHAPTER IX.

HILTON remained but a short time with the Ash-tons that evening, seeming so restless and miserable, with all his efforts to resume his usual manner, that even Mrs. Ashton, generally so complacently absorbed in her own sensations, looked wonderingly and compassionately at him, and ventured upon a few placid inquiries as to his comfort. Harry, knowing the bitter truth, was genuinely distressed, and yet blundered hopelessly in endeavoring to cheer him, without betraying the secret of his sympathy to the others, from whom Frank had entreated him to carefully conceal it. Rose, fearing by some unguarded speech to inflict an unwitting wound, was ill at ease and constrained, failing thus to offer the cheering influence of her usually bright and entertaining conversation. Thus, with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction that no one could quite analyze, they parted at an early hour; and Rose fairly dreaded meeting Frank the next morning at breakfast,

picturing with vivid imagination the increased effect a night of gloom would give to his troubles.

But she did not comprehend the real force and strength of his character, when once by a strong effort he should cast aside the morbid, unhealthy burden of remorse under which he had so long and weakly struggled. Harry's good counsel and practical common-sense had strongly comforted him; and he appeared with exact punctuality at breakfast, so cheerfully composed, so sedately smiling, that Rose in pleased surprise added to her usual morning salutation a cordial clasp of the hand—almost unconscious of doing so till Mrs. Wayland's significant looks brought a lovely flush of embarrassment to her face as she said, in low, half apologetic tones,

"So many new and strange thoughts have occupied me since yesterday, that I felt for the moment as if it were days rather than hours since we met."

"Did you?" he answered, in an equally subdued voice. "I had very much the same feeling, having seemed in my wakefulness to have traveled all the world over again in the night-watches."

She could only reply by a look of expressive, sympathetic thoughtfulness, as Fred Maynard observed cynically,

"How I envy Hilton the power of calling forth that fleeting blush, Miss Ashton!"

"Do you really accord me so high an honor?" Frank interposed promptly before she could attempt an answer. "Do you not know, in this perverse world, it is oftenest another woman's influence that calls forth such confusion of aspect?—that to the fair sex most often belongs the audacity which provokes it?"

"What an extraordinary sentiment!" replied Fred Maynard, honestly puzzled, as it was intended he should be.

"It is a fact, not a sentiment, my dear fellow. If it is indeed new to you, give me credit for my superior knowledge of human nature."

"But really, Mr. Hilton," said Mrs. Wayland, "you do say such queer things."

"How can any one preserve his wits in your dazzling presence? Forgive my incoherency, and tell me the last news of our gay world."

"How can there be any news at this early hour? You disappeared so mysteriously last evening, when I wanted to introduce you to the Headleys."

"Well, never mind the Headleys now; I have a more interesting topic than strangers," replied Hilton in tones so unconcerned, that Rose looked brightly up, relieved that he could speak so indif-

ferently. He went on : " It is going to be such a charming day ; so much cooler, while there is a fine breeze, why can we not make up a sailing-party ? "

" Delightful ! " cried the widow, clasping her hands enthusiastically. " Really, Mr. Hilton, like most silent men, when you do speak, it is to some purpose. "

" It is just the thing ! " added Fred Maynard. " They have a very nice boat here—large enough for all who care to go ; and most of us understand sailing. "

" That is very satisfactory, " returned Hilton carelessly. " If you will see about the boat being ready, like a good fellow—and Mrs. Wayland will make up the party. "

" Whom am I to ask ? " she interrupted doubtfully.

" Every one, of course. I wonder, Mrs. Ashton, if you could be tempted to venture. "

" Oh, no ! " cried both Harry and Rose in a breath. " It would be too much—she could not bear it. "

" Indeed ! " pettishly observed Mrs. Ashton, annoyed at their eager, well-meant protestations, and with the forwardness often shown by tenderly indulged invalids, quite captivated by the plan from which they sought to dissuade her. " I am so tired

of being shut up in my room, and have so few pleasures, surely I might be allowed this, which Mr. Hilton so considerably suggests !”

“Ought she?” murmured Rose, in an undertone, with an appealing look of alarmed inquiry.

His reply could only be an expressive, reassuring smile, which reminded her of the success of his former experiment, as he said composedly to Harry,

“I have no doubt Mrs. Ashton would find it very pleasant. If the walk to the beach is too much, she can be carried—”

“O no !” interrupted Mrs. Ashton ; “it is only a few steps, and shady all the way. I am really very much indebted to your thoughtfulness, Mr. Hilton, for giving me so rare a pleasure,” she added, as they all rose to leave the dining-room.

Frank could not fail to see Harry’s look of pain and Rose’s deeper distress at words which seemed so wantonly to reproach them with negligence in not sooner offering to the capricious invalid this new diversion, which so unexpectedly had taken possession of her fancy. In Harry the pain was quickly absorbed in unselfish pleasure that some prospect of enjoyment was opened thus fortunately to the long-suffering one, so dear to his generous heart ; and he hastened, cheerily, to make

every provision for her comfort, while half fearing the result.

But Rose's momentary pallor and depression, quickly as she strove to overcome them, brought a sensation of deep pity to Frank's heart; and he waited in restless impatience till he could say, as they walked a little behind the others, towards their rooms,

"Dear Miss Ashton, you must not feel those careless words so keenly. Your sister's seemingly unkind self-absorption is really a feature of her disease, and will disappear with it."

"Are you then so sanguine of her recovery?" with eager surprise and joy in her upward gaze.

"Very much more than at first. Even the slightest improvement would have offered great encouragement; and you must see how decidedly she has gained these last two days."

"And that we owe to you. How good you are, in all your own trouble, so to care for my poor Clare!"

"Do I not owe far more to you and Harry? Anywhere else in the world, without your faithful friendship, this cruel encounter would have crushed me utterly. I should not even have resisted the influence you have helped me to defy."

"You no longer dread it, then? How glad I am you sought Harry's aid!"

"I will not say I have no fear, no shrinking, from the trial which may yet be before me; but Harry's trusty support and your sweet sympathy will help me to brave any fate."

He took her hands, and held them for an instant in tender reverence; and then, releasing them, left her, not daring to trust himself to utter another word, as he looked upon her face, so expressive of joy and faith.

Not many moments later, as all met upon the shore, where the boat awaited them in full sailing trim, Mrs. Headley approached Frank, where he stood for a moment slightly apart, and half extending her hand, said, in guarded tones,

"Meeting again after so many years, Mr. Hilton, and resting for a time under one roof, shall there not be peace between us?"

"Peace!" he echoed scornfully, refusing her proffered hand, and sternly folding his arms as he looked proudly in her face, with a steady gaze before which her own eyes sank abashed. "After wrecking my whole life, and destroying all its light and hope, dare you talk to me of peace?"

Faintly struggling with a sudden remorse, as she marked the deep lines of care and pain on his pre-

maturely aged face, the heavy gloom which crept into his dark eyes, Mrs. Headley replied, almost humbly,

"The past had its bitterness for us all. Why not forget the irrevocable?"

"Just because it is irrevocable," he answered sternly. "Could any measure of suffering, any agony of atonement, bring back the dead—!"

"Hush!" she cried, turning deadly white, and clasping her hands entreatingly; "I cannot bear it. I can only say again, let there be peace between us! Of what use were anger and recrimination now?"

"None!" he muttered gloomily. "It would be a hollow peace indeed!—and yet I wish you no harm. Forbearance, at least, you may have at my hands; but beware, I warn you, how you cross my path again as you have done in the past!"

And turning abruptly away from her, he strode impetuously towards the boat. There all were so concerned in seeing Mrs. Ashton carefully assisted in embarking, and comfortably supported by cushions, in the seat she chose, under the broad awning, that even Rose failed to observe his momentary gloom and depression.

Quickly casting them aside, however, he entered zealously upon the duty of insuring to all ease

and desirable surroundings before stepping on board at last himself, and looking wistfully at Rose, near whom no place remained unoccupied.

Not thus, however, would he have been long content to be denied ; but while still considering by what ingenuity he could accomplish his desire Mrs. Headley, disturbed by Fred Maynard's persistent devotion to Rose, by whom he had secured just the seat the maneuverer had designed for Robert, soon contrived to call him to her side with some idle request he could not avoid complying with. With cool effrontery, she then insisted on his taking her place by her daughter Kate, who was, she assured him, so timid on the water ; would he not kindly take care of her ?

With visible reluctance Fred Maynard yielded and half morosely at first scarcely answered Kate Headley's shy remarks ; but his natural propensity for flirting shortly led him to make the best of the situation, and he was soon deep in the mysteries of that curious art.

Mrs. Headley then looked round for Robert, to point out to him the vacated seat she desired him to take ; but at the same moment in which she discovered him, closely ensconced by Mrs. Wayland's side, her quick eyes, which nothing escaped, saw Hilton coolly take possession of the coveted place

Their eyes met at the moment, and his were so full of calm self-assertion she dared not attempt any open interference ; but he failed not to mark the malignant gleam of hers, as she flashed them, for one instant of ungovernable rage, on both Rose and himself. By an unconscious impulse he moved closer to the fair girl, feeling a desperate resolve to guard her from he knew not what of concealed danger ; and his arm for an instant moved towards her with a protecting gesture, which made her look wonderingly in his troubled face.

With innocent confidence, she did not withdraw from him, as she asked softly,

“What is it ? What has troubled you so ?”

“How quickly you read my thoughts !” he answered, forcing a smile to reassure her. “It was only a passing fear, not deserving further mention ; only it would comfort me if you would make me a promise.”

“I should not find it easy to refuse,” she replied, with a slight blush. “What is it to be ?”

“Just this : If some day you are tempted to distrust or think evil of me, no matter how reasonable it may seem, give me your word to come frankly to me, and let me pronounce my own judgment. Trust me—I would not deceive you.”

“I know you would not,” very tranquilly. “It

seems absurd to suppose any one could influence my thoughts of you except yourself ; so the promise would be easily kept—”

“But you will make it?” he urged with a sudden flush of eagerness.

“Of course. Do you know that, but for Clare’s evident pleasure in this trip, I should have one selfish regret.”

“And that—?”

“I could so much more have enjoyed a quieter morning like yesterday.”

“But we can still have that. Our sail must not be long, for fear of wearying Mrs. Ashton; and as she will need to rest when we return, surely you could then give me another lesson in crochet?”

With a little gesture of warning Rose checked him, as she observed Mrs. Headley seemed to be watching them so intently, that she might even have caught some fragments of their conversation.

Presently some one started a gay boating-song, and all joined merrily in the chorus; after which the faint constraint at first felt in the gathering thus closely together of so many comparative strangers seemed entirely removed, and all chattered blithely, as their fancy led them.

Frank’s deep musical voice in the song, however, not only woke long silent echoes in his own heart,

but brought to Mrs. Headley the sudden painful conviction that he was becoming free indeed from his long, harrowing thralldom, if he could sing so joyously and seem so light-hearted. While she pondered anxiously how to insure his renewed subjection to her will, Rose sat silently, dreaming vague, indefinite dreams, with a pensive joy, a sense of deep content, which brought to her features an air of utter repose she scarcely realized, but which Frank watched furtively, with intense pleasure.

CHAPTER X.

SEVERAL days passed; and all went so smoothly and pleasantly that Mrs. Headley felt strongly tempted to follow the wise course of forbearing to make the insidious and dastardly attack on Frank Hilton's fair fame which she had half inaugurated on the first evening of her arrival by mysterious looks, half-uttered insinuations, and an air of grieved benevolence. His indignant defiance on the day of the sailing-party had chafed and irritated her sorely; yet, seeing how strong was the friendship of the Ashtons for him, she half feared their zealous partisanship would defy even her ingenious vindictiveness to shake their trust in the object of her animosity. Should they indeed remain faithful to him, she knew how serious was the hazard of attacking one in whose defense all their influence would be exerted. Thus she hesitated, hoping the course of events might promise sufficient success to her plans to make unnecessary the unscrupulous interference she longed yet dreaded to attempt. She was chiefly interested in aiding her son to secure some ad-

vantage with Rose Ashton; and having with a mother's natural partiality interpreted her gentle kindness towards him as denoting his having made a decidedly favorable impression, she would have been content to watch his further progress in hopeful inaction. She began at length, however, to feel that Rose surrounded herself with a cautious but impenetrable reserve, before which all Robert Headley's advances recoiled fruitlessly upon himself. Mrs. Ashton's delicate health so absorbed all the care and thoughts of her husband and sister, that no one could penetrate the seclusion within which they withdrew at pleasure. Never suspecting Frank Hilton's free admission into their apartments, not having yet discovered his quiet strolls with Rose, which he carefully guarded from observation in fear of her maliciousness, she yet had a dim foreboding that he was becoming a formidable obstacle in her way, which she knew not how to overcome. It needed more courage than she was quite ready to exert to openly brave him, and to freely circulate her garbled version of their past intercourse. Could she but gain the Ashtons' confidence first, and induce them to give credence to her narrative, all would go well; but the uncertainty how they would yet take it, the apprehension that a premature showing of her hand might arouse them into

strongly espousing Frank Hilton's cause, kept her awhile inactive and irresolute. She could not be quite silent, however, when on the third day Mrs. Wayland, annoyed by Fred Maynard's disappearance, which she shrewdly suspected was due to the captivation of his capricious fancy by the fresh youthful prettiness of Kate Headley, and finding no other food for her own taste in flirting, took refuge with Mrs. Headley, and began pettishly to clamor for some explanation of her half-uttered innuendoes about Frank Hilton.

"He is such a Don Magnifico!" she cried impatiently; "making himself so charming just when he chooses, and then retiring into himself in such an aggravating way. Do tell me what you have known of him."

"Our acquaintance was so very short," with affected hesitation and reluctance.

"Even then a whole romance may be condensed in the events of a few days, you know. Where did you meet? I think you said it was abroad."

"We only crossed in the same steamer."

"Well, one makes delightful acquaintances that way, at times."

"True; but to tell you the truth, I did not fancy all I saw of him there."

"What did he do that displeased you? At least

he can never have been guilty of flirting, with that ceremonious reserve of his."

"O, he was then very young. It was years ago, when my dear children were still in their early childhood; and really I was so absorbed in their care I did not notice much of the doings of others."

"You are very provoking to keep me in such suspense. You know there is a story, if you would only tell it."

"Why not ask Mr. Hilton, my dear Mrs. Wayland? He might give you a much more interesting account."

"You know I should not dare. I tried once to ask him some questions, and got beautifully snubbed for my pains."

"Indeed!—that is not like him. He used to delight in watching the unfolding mind. But I must go now—Kate will be looking for me;" rising, and gathering the work together, with which she had made a pretense of being occupied.

"And you mean to leave me so unsatisfied? At least tell me whose was 'the unfolding mind.'"

"Ah! do not ask me. It was such a sad, sad story! The poor child paid dearly for the happiness so fleeting, so soon ended! I cannot say another word now;" and Mrs. Headley, delicately pressing her cambric handkerchief to her averted eyes, hasti-

ly left the room before Mrs. Wayland could contrive to utter further entreaties.

"I will make somebody tell me," she murmured desperately. "I will not be so foiled ! That good-looking youth Robert must be wandering about, looking for Miss Ashton, in his usual forlorn way. He may have some idea or remembrance which will give me a clew to this mystery: I will hunt him up."

Flying hither and thither through the grounds, in her usual volatile fashion, Mrs. Wayland at length found the object of her search, and soon was plying him skillfully with ingeniously arranged questions, whose motive he never suspected.

Leading him, with apparent carelessness, to speak of their long sojourn abroad in the days of his boyhood, she asked presently,

"And it was then you knew Mr. Hilton ?"

"O, no !" he answered, a little surprised; "I scarcely remember him at all. I do not think we ever met him abroad."

"Still you have known him somewhere ?"

"Only on the steamer crossing, I think," he replied, with a puzzled, pained manner she was quick to observe.

"But you must have seen a good deal of him

there," she persisted, annoyed at his evident unwillingness to speak frankly.

"Very little, as far as I remember. Kate and I were such mere children then, and of course—"

"He was more with those of his own age, I suppose—flirting with the pretty girls, and amusing himself generally."

"O, no!"—loyal ever to one memory, still sacred, with all its indistinctness; "he was engaged, you know, to Agnes."

"And who was Agnes?" she asked so eagerly, that he recoiled a little as he replied more gravely,

"My sister who died."

Even Mrs. Wayland was silenced for a moment by this unexpected announcement. A simple engagement to a girl long since dead was not so much of a story after all. Doubtless Mrs. Headley, with her personal interest and her evidently exaggerated sentimentality, chose to magnify the simple fact into a lamentable tragedy; but it did not seem to her worth half the pains she had bestowed in seeking to unravel so harmless a mystery.

Provoked with a result so inadequate, and suddenly curious about Frank Hilton's present employment, having a fancy he was with the Ashtons, and possibly accompanied also by Fred Maynard,

she made some trifling excuse to dismiss Robert Headley, while she took the bold measure of sending her card to Mrs. Ashton, proposing to call on her in her room.

A polite answer, asking her to excuse Mrs. Ashton, who was lying down, and stating Rose's absence on a walk, did not tend either to subdue her rising irritation, or to suggest any new efforts in search of those whom she dimly suspected were not far away from where Rose's wandering footsteps might have led her.

Rose had gone out with Harry as soon as Mrs. Ashton, who was resting after the unwonted effort of receiving a call from Mrs. Bradford, began drowsily to enter into the first stages of the refreshing slumber, which had now become not only a habit, but a necessity of the morning. Frank regarded the establishment of this habit, which he had himself suggested, as a very encouraging symptom in her case. Her rest at night was often so broken and unsatisfying,—the mere feeling that she was expected to lie still and sleep, serving, with the usual perversity of nervous disease, to throw her at once into a restless, wide-awake condition,—that the few hours thus secured of calm, enjoyable repose were very precious. The formerly long, weary day thus shortened lost much of

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its dreariness ; and her actual hours of pain thus scattered and abbreviated no longer kept her nerves in a state of constant irritation. Thus by faint, almost imperceptible degrees the healing process slowly but surely went on ; and the wonted petulance of her expression was becoming soothed into a semblance of the placid sweetness of her earlier days.

Rose and Harry had idled away an hour in the billiard-room, where he indolently assumed to improve her very crude ideas on the subject of that absorbing game, and to teach her to acquire by practice the skill of which her fragile fingers seemed incapable.

She would really accomplish a few strokes quite creditably, but even this was effected with a painstaking weariness, in which she evidently took no pleasure. When Frank Hilton presently joined them his cheerfulness and amusing remarks roused her into a momentary animation, and she again addressed herself more energetically to the game ; but he was quick to perceive her languor and depression, and to urge almost immediately a brisk walk in place of the game for which she cared so little.

With an expression of relief she gladly assented ; and as they sauntered forth, strolling somewhat

aimlessly through the grounds towards the beach, Frank saw in the faintly rising color, the dawning light in her eyes, the less weary step, how fortunate was his suggestion. Still quietly observing her without seeming to do so, he continued to chat with Harry, content with Rose's evident interest, which her intent listening showed, although she ventured only at rare intervals upon an actual remark.

"Do you think, Frank," asked Harry, after a slight pause, during which they had found comfortable, well-shaded seats, in full view of the bay, across which came a delightfully refreshing breeze, "that Clare could bear the fatigue of a drive to the mountains?"

"I should doubt it," he answered thoughtfully. "Why have you thought of such a very great effort for her?"

"It was not my idea, but hers."

"Hers! Her energies must be reviving indeed if she has imagined such a thing, knowing anything of the distance and the roughness of the road."

"I believe Mrs. Bradford suggested it at first; but Clare is very anxious to try it, and even wants to make up a large party."

"I don't think it would do. You know, so far, I have encouraged Mrs. Ashton to make efforts that

you have dreaded for her ; but this time she is too enterprising. The wearisome jarring of the carriage might irritate her sensitive nerves, causing a relapse I should very much regret. At the same time, it is not wise to oppose her too vehemently. Contrive rather to put it off till some more feasible notion takes the place of this very impracticable one."

"How well you understand human weakness and perversity !" observed Rose demurely. "If you would only as carefully study the needs of your own nature—"

"Of what does this unsparing critic mean now to accuse me ?" interrupted Frank, with mingled amusement and vexation.

"Are you unconscious of your own faults ?" she asked, with some confusion at her boldness of speech.

"Doubtless I have many ; yet if you will define them categorically—"

"Nay," she said gently, fearing, with quick sensitiveness, lest her half-jest had inflicted unintentional pain. "You must not think—"

A sudden warning gesture from Harry arrested her speech, as with a quizzical grimace he silently directed his companions' attention to the figures of Fred Maynard and Kate Headley slowly passing

before them in such a direction that they were not likely to perceive the presence of the others.

All three remained silent, not caring by sound or movement to attract an attention which might result in so unwelcome an addition to their party; and the unconscious pair were already retreating beyond hearing, almost beyond sight, when the sudden springing towards them of a large dog, with really friendly gestures, however, caused Kate Headley to turn impulsively towards her companion, uttering a little cry of terror, and timidly clinging to him with a piteous air of fright. It provoked even in him a smile of good-humored ridicule, although he met her with an encircling arm, and, with a sort of patronizing kindness, smoothed the disordered tresses with his disengaged hand, from which her hat had fallen back as she leaned against him, and he even patted gently the flushed cheek, so temptingly within his reach.

The dog meanwhile, finding his harmless gambols so misunderstood, went plunging and careering on his original way, quite indifferent to the result of his onset.

Still Fred Maynard held the girl in that careless half-embrace, while Harry, whose usual placid good-nature covered a really impetuous temperament, half rose to his feet, muttering angrily,

"What business has that fellow—"

"Stay, Harry," softly interposed Frank. "It may not be quite all his fault."

"Surely that mere child is too innocent—"

With a slight gesture Frank mutely reminded him of Rose's presence, as with downcast looks and flushed cheeks she tried to seem unaware of what was occurring. At the same instant Fred unconcernedly withdrew his arm, and, making some observation to his companion which did not reach their ears, they sauntered slowly on again, and were soon out of sight behind some intervening shrubbery.

Relieved somewhat from her embarrassment, yet still confused and uncomfortable, Rose sprang hurriedly to her feet, and busied herself zealously in gathering some sprays of delicate wild-flowers which grew at a short distance, while Harry asked, in tones of puzzled bewilderment,

"Do you really suspect that young girl of such deliberate forwardness?"

"I should dread being unjust to her," replied Frank with a dreary sigh; "and yet, remembering the mother's unscrupulousness, which so influenced my poor Agnes—"

"Ought we not, then, to warn Maynard?"

"I cannot bear to think so; and yet, at his age,

with his experience of the world, surely he ought to be too much on his guard to make any serious mistake."

"Well, we can wait and see," said Harry; added in an undertone, as Rose returned and they commenced slowly retracing their steps, "How I wish those confounded Headleys had never come!"

CHAPTER XI.

ROSE had of late lost something of her painfully fragile appearance; and while still *spirituelle* and delicate-looking to an extreme, which might well excite grave uneasiness on the part of so close and skillful an observer as Frank Hilton, yet the faint improvement already manifested had encouraged him to hope that in her also he might succeed in effecting a beneficial change of aspect, as well as in health. He looked at her, however, the next morning with renewed anxiety. An ashen pallor pervaded every feature, quenching utterly the light of her downcast eyes, while her lips quivered faintly, yet piteously at each effort to speak when constrained to do so by the questioning of those nearest her at the breakfast-table.

He watched her with veiled eagerness for some moments, burning with impatience to learn what he yet dreaded to know. While he was still chafing under this suspense Mrs. Wayland entered the dining-room with the Bradfords, and coming on to her own place, opposite Rose, with an increase of

her wonted vivacity she exclaimed, with clasped hands and eager gestures,

"Have you heard how Mrs. Bradford was disturbed last night?"

"No; what was it?" questioned Fred Maynard with great animation, meaning to make his peace with the fair widow by feigning an interest in her narrative he did not believe it warranted.

"It was a dreadful cry under her windows in the very middle of the night."

At this Rose's pallor deepened, and she drew her breath with a sudden, quick gasp, audible only to Frank's attentive ears. He glanced towards her keenly yet covertly; and in alarm at her evident suffering, he took her trembling fingers as they lay nervelessly in her lap into his strong, reassuring clasp for an instant, yet so quietly as not to be observed, as he murmured in low tones, which were covered by the buzz of excitement that followed Mrs. Wayland's announcement,

"Control yourself, dear child! Be sure it is really nothing—that it can be readily explained away."

With a faint smile and grateful look Rose acknowledged this thoughtful consideration, but the shadow crept over her face again as the eager voices around her continued to discuss the subject.

"After all," Fred Maynard was saying very incredulously, "may it not have been the howling of a dog? There is a big fellow somewhere round, that I met only yesterday."

"Nonsense!" cried Mrs. Wayland almost angrily. "Mrs. Bradford says it was a long, low, melancholy wail, seeming rather in the air than near the ground, and reminded her of the banshee's cry, as it is described in books."

"What absurdity!" half laughed Harry Ashton. "The banshee!—a mere superstition of past ages."

"I did not say it was a banshee," sharply replied the little widow, vexed at his good-humored railery. "Mrs. Bradford says it startled her dreadfully, so that she could not sleep for ever so long afterwards; and no imaginary sound would do that."

"I do not say it was imaginary," returned Ashton composedly. "Probably, as Maynard suggests, it was a dog; but as none of us heard it, and our windows are next Mrs. Bradford's—"

"To be sure," commented Mrs. Wayland reflectively, "Mrs. Ashton, who is so wakeful, ought to have heard it also. Are you sure she did not? Do you know, Miss Ashton?" addressing Rose, with a look of curious inquiry, yet failing to note her utter languor.

"I have not heard of her being disturbed," said Rose, scarcely able to speak collectedly, and rising slowly, as though her strength were unequal to the exertion; then she added, "I must go to her at once, for fear some exaggerated account of this may frighten her." .

Her languid movements and the faint dreariness of her tones appealed so strongly to Frank Hilton's sympathy, that while stopping an instant to make some careless excuse to the others, he quickly followed her from the room; overtaking her in the hall where she stood in momentary bewilderment, as though unable to control her thoughts for deliberate action.

"Do not go to Mrs. Ashton now," he urged, drawing her arm through his as he spoke. "Till you are more composed, you would only seriously agitate her. Come with me to the billiard-room, where no one ever goes at this hour, and tell me what all this means."

Without a word, seeming almost unconscious of his presence, Rose unresistingly yielded to his urging, attempting no speech, till, seated by an open window through which the air came with refreshing coolness, and drinking first a little cold water from the glass he hastened to bring her, she rallied her forces enough to answer his eager entreaties for

an account of the experience he knew she must have bitterly endured.

"I can but repeat what Mrs. Wayland said," she murmured shudderingly. "It was a terrible cry, yet not quite human in sound. It was more like the wail of a disembodied spirit, in great anguish."

"Like what you imagine it would be," he gently suggested. "Remember, dear Miss Ashton, no one has ever seen a spirit or heard its cry. Angelic spirits, we may hope, are too happy to disturb our earth-born senses with their presence, even could we perceive it; neither can the cry of the lost ones, however it may ascend eternally in judgment against the tempter, reach our material hearing."

Gravely puzzled by this surprising address, Rose raised her eyes earnestly to his, seeking to understand his meaning; while her nerves were already steadied by this new sensation, as he had hoped they would be.

"You say such strange things," she uttered hesitatingly.

"Not more strange than your own words. Did you really believe it was a spirit you heard?"

"Not exactly. Only it was so sad, and in the utter darkness so mysterious and alarming!"

"It was startling, of course; but we can easily find some natural cause for it. I only wish I could

make you feel how wrong it is for you to give way to such weakness. A nervous shock like this will unhinge and upset you for hours; and you should not permit the precious strength, needed for all the duties of the day, to be frittered away so heedlessly."

He spoke almost sternly; and Rose's eyes were full of tears, called forth by the pain his seeming harshness inflicted, as she raised them pleadingly, with wordless eloquence, to meet the gaze whose grave reproof he vainly sought to maintain.

"You think me a brute to speak so roughly!" he cried impetuously, taking her hands in his, with remorseful tenderness. "Yet what can I do else to rouse you from this terrible languor?"

"It will pass off presently," she answered, still struggling with her tears. "I know you mean only to be kind; but a man can never understand a woman's nervous horror of the supernatural."

"Of the really supernatural I also should stand in awe; but I want to convince you that this doleful cry had some natural source, at which we will both laugh when we discover it."

"Laugh?—no! Discover what you will, I could never laugh at what has so terrified me."

"Will it pain you to describe as nearly as you can this singular cry? My window being next to yours, I don't see why I did not hear it too."

"It was enough to have awakened you, I should think."

"Were you asleep then?"

"No : I cannot have that excuse for possibly imagining it. I had slept some hours quite heavily; and awoke suddenly, feeling more weary and unrefreshed than when I first retired. I became all at once singularly wide-awake; and had a restless, disturbed sensation, as though some sound or touch had awakened me. I was even trying to penetrate the dark corners of my room, and to make out each dim outline, so impressed was I becoming of some strange presence in the room. I fancied I heard faint, stifled breathing, soft rustling sounds, while the shadows around me seemed to glide mockingly to and fro"—

"Rose," faintly cried Frank, startled beyond all endurance or self-control by this terrible imagining; "do you know all the horror of what you are saying? Have you ever before had such fancies?"

"Never quite so vividly," she answered with vague uneasiness at his alarm. "It is only overwrought nervousness, I suppose."

"Tell me," he said, more collectedly, and trying to speak carelessly, "you are sure, of course, there could not really have been sound or movement in your room?"

"How could there be?" with utter simplicity, looking up in surprise.

"I do not know,"—a little absently, as though gravely pondering some other thought. "Your outer door opening on the corridor you lock, I suppose; but is there any other communicating with your sister's room?"

"None. Why do you ask?"

"Only— Tell me the rest of this story, please."

"There is very little more to say. I only wanted you to see how thoroughly wide-awake I was when that cry came. It was first a low, faint wail, as if quite far off—a long-drawn note of pain and grief, rather than any cry of distress. It had scarcely died entirely away than it was repeated, more fully and clearly, as if approaching nearer; and then, after one moment's silence, it resounded a third time, so close, that it seemed just outside my window. I remember watching and holding my breath while it lasted—but with difficulty, it was so prolonged."

"And then?—you made no attempt to discover its source?"

"Not immediately. I was so nervous before, I could only lie still, at first, too weak and startled to move. Then remembering there might really be some human being in cruel suffering, who had ut-

tered that cry for help, I forced myself to go to the window and look out; but of course there was nothing."

"No one seems to have heard it except you and Mrs. Bradford," thoughtfully recalling the surroundings and outlook of their rooms. "My room is next yours, and the last on that side; still, there are windows both above and below."

"Above are only lumber-rooms, and below are the parlors. This wing of the house has only two stories, you know."

"True; I must find out several things presently. Meantime," looking earnestly in the face, which was already regaining some of its gentle animation and brightness under the comforting influence of his kindly strength-giving sympathy, "may I appeal to your remembrance of the gladly rendered services you have so often commended beyond their deserts, and ask you seriously to grant me one great favor?"

"How needless a question! Whatever is possible you know I will always do."

"Promise me then to put this little incident as much as possible out of your thoughts. Do not let any of the people in the house discuss it with you, and try to forget it in more cheerful contemplations. Leave it to me to find out whatever is dis-

coverable about it, and trust me to tell you all that I learn on the subject."

"I will be glad to forget it if I can," she answered simply; "but you will never find out anything, I am sure."

"And why?"

"I do not know—only that is my conviction."

"Very well. I must not oppose your convictions. Where are you going now?" as she rose presently, with one regretful glance from the window as she turned away.

"I must go to Clare for a while, not only to hear whether she shared our experience, which I do not believe, but to make sure no one tells her some frightful story about it."

"She would not really mind it as much as you. Do you know I am feeling rather victimized myself. I have not had any breakfast to speak of, and have not even exactly enjoyed this little interview, you have made me do so much scolding."

"I would say it was not needed, only I suppose it really was. What is it I am to do to make amends? All that preamble was not for nothing, I am sure."

"It is almost enough to see you so bright and smiling again. Still the breakfast was a serious loss."

"Come with me, and I will give you some deli-

cious peaches Mr. Bradford sent us last evening, with some biscuits and a glass of wine."

"No; that is too material. Let us have the peaches, with your work, and some book full of ghostly horrors, to meet your present taste, such as Poe's 'Raven.'"

"Hush! You shall not make fun of me in that way."

"I assure you I was quite in earnest; but if your capricious fancy requires another change we will endeavor to gratify it, and with all the paraphernalia necessary for our various enjoyments we will seek our usual seclusion down by the beach, as soon as Mrs. Ashton can spare you. Will that do?"

"If you really wish it," with unusual hesitation.

"Wish it? I claim it confidently on your promise."

"Well, I will see Clare first."

"By the bye, I think I am tired of crochet. Can't you bring some other kind of work?"

"Really! Suppose I have nothing else?"

"Oh, I am sure you have. I have observed ladies quite often lately doing some kind of charity-work that looked bright and pretty."

"What a queer description! Can you not give me a clearer idea of it?"

"It seemed to be some coarse, rough material,

with colored work all over it. You must know what I mean. Mrs. Bradford was doing some ■ it."

"O!" with an amused laugh he secretly rejoiced to hear, as the puzzled look disappeared, while she never suspected his motive in talking such apparent nonsense. "You mean Kensington embroidery? Do you know, you audacious man, that what you call charity-work is the honored employment of even royal hands?—that it is our highest aim in artistic culture to—"

"Now, don't exaggerate so dreadfully. How can such materials produce results worthy of such glowing terms?"

"Well, the caprice does not quite reach my standard, I confess. Still we accomplish quite effective successes. I will show you by and by, if I find I can come."

"There is to be no doubt you are to come. I will wait till you do, and come clamoring after you soon."

"Very well," she nodded, looking back smilingly as she left him.

CHAPTER XII.

GRAVELY perplexed by these strange occurrences, and deeply troubled by their depressing effect on Rose's sensitive, overstrained nerves, Frank Hilton pondered their possible interpretation, and above all their sure and speedy ending, in the interval during which he waited for Rose. Brief as it was, all the momentary brightness he had called forth by his studied carefulness had utterly vanished; and his own look grew pained and thoughtful as he marked the languid step which laggingly brought her towards him, the air of profound dejection in her downcast features.

Without immediately speaking, however, he took from her nerveless hands the dainty basket of peaches she had brought, and even the little roll of work sought in obedience to his request, and walked quietly by her side down the long corridor, and the flight of steps beyond, to the side door, through which they could pass quietly over the shrubbery.

As they strolled on, still silently, Rose looked up at last in surprise, saying gently,

"How quiet you are! Has anything troubled you?"

"What a question! Have I much encouragement to be gay when you look so woe-begone?"

A flush of pain came over her face, and she shrank sensitively from his reproachful tone; yet the shock roused her into a sudden sense of her selfishness in being so absorbed and depressed by her sad thoughts, and she answered deprecatingly,

"Forgive me! I am not indeed fit for any companionship to-day. Let me go back again."

"You truly seem to have made up your mind to torment me to-day. First I must lose my breakfast and have all my sympathies exhausted by tales of horror, and now when I looked for some recreation you coolly talk of leaving me! No, you may not go back. With our book and our peaches and our new work it will go hard with me if I cannot have a pleasant morning."

Thus jestingly Frank continued to rouse her drooping spirits, and to compel some exertion on her own part to regain the cheerfulness he so boldly required as his due. Like a delicate instrument in strong but skilled hands, her susceptible nature responded with unerring truth and force of tone to his firm and gentle touch, and soon he had the satisfaction of seeing her rather pensive

smiles deepen into positive joyousness as he made quaint, curious comments on her work, pretended to quarrel over the just division of the fruit, or read to her rather what would be trifling and amusing than the finer selections more usually to her taste.

As they returned, after some hours had been thus profitably idled away, knowing Mrs. Ashton might by this time need amusement, Frank detained Rose for an instant before entering their sitting-room, whence the unwonted sound of merry voices betokened the presence of visitors, saying earnestly,

"For all our sakes as well as your own, do not let yourself become again unnerved. Exert all your strength and courage to resist this evil influence."

With a sudden realization of his patient, unselfish goodness, his unwearied efforts to restore the needed tone to her overwrought sensibility, Rose replied simply, yet with equal earnestness,

"I will. I have been very weak."

"You have been cruelly tried," he answered, with a look of cordial approval, as they entered the room.

Mrs. Ashton, hearing some vague rumor of the night's mysterious events, and impatient to learn

every particular of the new sensation, had sent for Mrs. Bradford to minister to her morbid curiosity • on the subject, and had been thoroughly enjoying the relation so graphically given of these unwonted horrors.

"Only think, Rose!" she exclaimed eagerly, "Mrs. Bradford heard such a mysterious cry—"

"So did I," interrupted Rose, with attempted lightness.

"You also, Miss Ashton?" returned Mrs. Bradford. "I am so glad I was not the only one to hear it. What did it seem like to you?"

"I could hardly tell," replied Rose hesitatingly, and looking appealingly at Frank for aid.

"Really, I must insist, in my medical capacity, that you should both take composing draughts," he said, smiling in cheerful serenity, as he carelessly took a seat near Mrs. Ashton. "You hear an unexpected noise, probably the howling of a dog—"

"Oh no! it was not a dog," hastily interrupted Mrs. Bradford.

"What was it, then?" with cool inquiry.

"It was—" pausing uncertainly as she caught his quizzical look. "Well, something very dreadful, which startled me awfully, I know."

"Almost any sound in the still darkness of night is startling," he replied in grave expostulation;

"but so long as no tangible object really presented itself—"

"But that is just what makes it so terrifying."

"How strange it is that I heard nothing," observed Mrs. Ashton in an injured tone, as though she had been defrauded of some innocent pleasure. "Why did you not call me, Rose?"

"It would have been a pity to disturb you," returned Rose gently. "I did wonder if you too had been alarmed; but all seemed quiet in your room."

"I should not have been alarmed," tranquilly said Mrs. Ashton. "Probably it was really a dog, or some wild animal from the woods. But I really have so few excitements, shut up as I am so much in my room, that it seems provoking to have missed this. You must both promise me to call me if it comes again."

Exchanging curious, puzzled looks, they gave the required promise, wondering that, of all others, this delicate invalid, who shrank so sensitively from the lightest impressions, the least perceptible sensations, should covet so eagerly to share in the horrors from whose bare remembrance they still recoiled.

Frank soon effected a change in the conversation to gayer themes; and, calling upon the rich

stores of his varied recollections, so amused and entertained them for more than an hour that, as they at length reluctantly parted to obey the calls of duty elsewhere, he could see while Mrs. Bradford was entirely absorbed in some reminiscences which she knew would interest her husband, that even with Rose the memory of that sad, strange cry was no longer ever-present.

He took every opportunity through the afternoon and evening to keep Rose's thoughts diverted from the subject, and to suggest new subjects both for amusement and consideration. With all his wide resources, his high cultivation, his strong, earnest nature, he could not fail so to impress and sustain hers that, as the bright, pleasant evening ended, he could look with content into her eyes, which met his with such utter reliance, such unquestioning faith, and feel he had gained a dearly-prized victory.

Before leaving them, however, he said carelessly,

"By the bye, I have in my room some delicious Russian wine that I wish you would all taste. May I bring you some now?"

Rose would have demurred; but Mrs. Ashton interposed hastily,

"If it is not much trouble, please do. I have

heard so much of the peculiar wines of Russia as so pure and delicate."

"I will bring it at once," he answered gayly. "Mrs. Ashton honors all my foreign treasures with such appreciation, I know she will like this."

Returning in a very few minutes with a quaint-looking flask, curiously ornamented with silver bands which were engraved with rich arabesques, and producing also some tiny glasses similarly decorated, from which, he gravely announced, it was necessary to drink the wine to preserve its flavor to perfection, Frank filled each with the delicate golden-colored fluid, which sent forth a delicious aroma as it was poured out.

It was in truth of so subtle and delicate a flavor that Frank needed to exert but little persuasion to induce them to empty each glass, amid a pleasant little chorus of praise, at which he showed unusual gratification.

With very few parting words, he presently took his leave for the night; holding Rose's hand for one instant as he looked earnestly in her face, with an expression half-troubled, half-reassuring, which awoke a momentary feeling of uneasiness, almost at once dispersed by his simple, cordial "Good-night."

But he did not seek repose for himself. At odd

intervals through the day he had ascertained various facts as to the surroundings of the rooms on that side of the house, which he needed to know to form some theory about the mysterious cry he was resolved to fathom. A vague suspicion of some malicious motive for startling the Bradfords and Ashtons, who alone, with himself, occupied that wing of the building, led him to make sure the lumber-rooms overhead were not only disused, but kept locked. The parlors beneath were, of course, left open all night; but they were in too public a position to successfully conceal any midnight wanderer. Without, all was open and clear for quite a space from the house; and there was neither tree nor bush near enough to screen any creature who might have made that inexplicable sound.

Thus prepared for a secret watch in the gathering darkness, so arranging his window-blinds as to remain entirely unperceived by any one without, yet able instantly to look forth upon the slightest sound,—he extinguished his light, and, still fully dressed, sat down calmly for his solitary vigil; first softly unclosing his door, not enough to be perceptible to a passer-by, but only to admit the slightest sound in the corridor.

Here, hour after hour, he remained, noting the

various faint, distant sounds through the house, which indicated the retirement of one after another of its inmates to their respective rooms, till at length complete stillness reigned within, and he could begin to hear the far-off cry of the night-bird, the soothing hum of myriads of insects, whose reign now commenced.


But even this, Nature's own serenade, was stilled at last ; and a profound slumber seemed to possess every creature except himself. Thus far he had sat quietly, letting his thoughts wander far and near, as caprice took possession of them ; and his enforced inaction in the utter darkness did not seem either wearisome or constrained. But as the hours passed, as the solemn chimes sounded forth the prolonged strokes of midnight, and then, after a long pause of dread silence, the next hour was proclaimed, with its startling solitary note, a sense of restless, unendurable impatience came over him. The approaching moment at which the moon, though shorn of half its glory, would rise and disperse the intense gloom, was already faintly bringing a less dense obscurity as of dawning twilight ; and as he looked through the half-closed blinds the darkness seemed to take shape and gather together in indefinable masses, which ap-

peared to his excited fancy in fantastic motion before him.

At the same time his bewildered ears heard strange, rustling sounds, as though a mighty wind came, with measured, resistless force, swaying and surging amongst the heavy, dew-laden foliage; and yet, as he looked more eagerly forth, no breath of air disturbed the intense stillness of the night: not a leaf seemed in motion against the gloomy, starless sky.

His usually calm, equable temperament could no longer resist the force of his fevered imagination, which so strangely peopled the obscurity without, calling up fancied shadows and curious sounds, till, bewildered, confused, with every nerve shaken, he suddenly bent his face down upon his clasped hands with an irrepressible shudder. Then, as these strange imaginings seemed to fleet away, leaving an utter stillness again, which rested refreshingly upon his overstrained perception, there came suddenly a faint, low, wailing cry, rising and swaying on the air, which brought him in startled horror to his feet. In the dead silence which followed, it seemed as if he could hear each pulsation of his wildly beating heart; that a cold, clammy grasp held his throat with a pressure which was suffocating him. Struggling bravely with these

sensations, and drinking hastily a little water from a glass which stood near, he vigorously threw off this overpowering oppression, and stood eagerly on the alert for a repetition of the cry. Intolerable as was the intervening interval, closely as he watched for it, bracing each nerve to bear it calmly, it was still with a great shock that it came, fuller and stronger this time, as though close to the window within which he stood. It seemed clearly a human voice, apparently a woman's, yet having a weird, hollow sound, irresistibly suggesting the supernatural, even to his strong, well-balanced mind. Controlling himself with a mighty effort, as it came with such closeness to his ears, he noiselessly turned the blind, and looked eagerly in every direction. Although the moon was still within some minutes of rising, its approaching light, even through the intervening clouds, rendered every outline now sufficiently distinct to assure him of there being no animate presence within the wide range which his window commanded. Puzzled beyond all imagining, he had still retained positive control of his bewildered senses, and stood considering some more extended search, when again that mysterious wail sounded upon the vibrating air. But this time some faint change in the tone, its lower, softer note, as though fading gradually in the distance,



struck one fatal chord of memory, and seemed to crash with cruel distinctness upon his consciousness.

Staggering away from the window, and groping wildly in the darkness for an instant, he stumblingly fell across the foot of his bed, hiding his face in bitter despair, as he cried faintly,

“Agnes !”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE hours of sleepless pain in which the night slowly wore away for Frank Hilton, bitterly as he felt them, failed to leave as startling an impress on his grave features the next morning as the less poignant, merely nervous shock of the previous night had produced on those, so much more delicate, more impressionable, of Rose Ashton.

A little paler and sterner he may have seemed at first, as he walked with studied leisureliness down the long dining-room to his place ; but as he took his seat, and, having pleasantly acknowledged the morning salutations from across the table, turned to greet more warmly the Ashtons, who had also just arrived, no one unaware of the night's occurrences would have ever guessed them, who looked on his quietly smiling lips, his calm, open brow. Even Rose, quick as she would have been to detect any covert suffering in look or tone, was entirely deceived by his steadied tones, as he gently asked of her having rested well, of her being ready for a long ramble after breakfast.

"If I can leave Clare, I should like it very much," she answered brightly. "I slept so unusually well, without even a dream to disturb me, I have been wondering if your Russian wine did not possess some magical properties to bestow such repose."

"Is it not rather that you have a good conscience?" he asked, half-jestingly.

"I should not like to think my conscience is usually so overburdened as to account for my frequent sleeplessness," she rejoined. "It is much more likely that your wine was a sedative draught."

His eyes fell before her clear, truthful gaze, and he turned almost abruptly away lest she should observe his momentary confusion; assuming to be absorbed in giving some orders to a servant who was opportunely passing. At the same instant Mrs. Wayland withdrew Rose's attention from the subject by asking,

"Do you know whether there were any mysterious noises last night, Miss Ashton? It is so provoking they come only on your side of the house, where only Mrs. Bradford is wakeful enough to appreciate them."

"We will very gladly have them transferred to yours," interposed Harry Ashton, laughing; "that is, if they are continued. For my part, I don't attach much importance to them, since I can sleep

so comfortably through them. However, I have not yet heard that we were so far favored last night."

"I fancy not," added Rose tranquilly. "One always hears so quickly of such things."

"Were there not three cries the first night?" asked Mrs. Wayland, with a slight shudder. "You know that is the number which constitutes a spiritual warning; so it is not to be expected it will be repeated."

"So much the better," observed Harry; "only Mrs. Ashton will be disappointed, having set her heart on sharing the new sensation."

"How strange that is!" cried Mrs. Wayland in surprise. "Of all our inmates, I should have imagined Mrs. Ashton would most have dreaded such an experience."

"It is so much a question of early training," observed Fred Maynard meditatively. "Speaking of the matter to Miss Headley yesterday, I was puzzled to see how she shrank and grew pale at the thought, as though she had some time been dreadfully frightened. Yet she assured me, quite eagerly, it was only a passing nervousness, for which there was no real cause."

"Probably the result of too much novel-reading," said Harry, somewhat severely for him. "At her

age, no taste can be more injudiciously indulged, for the result is always demoralizing."

"Poor, demoralized Kate Headley!" laughed Fred Maynard rather scornfully. "It is pretty true, however. It is astonishing how full her mind is of sentimental notions."


"How like a man that is!" petulantly interposed Mrs. Wayland. "You turn a girl's innocent head with your compliments and nonsense, and then make fun of her unmercifully behind her back."

"Turn her head!" exclaimed Fred Maynard indignantly; "you mean she has turned mine, I suppose. I won't deny I have flirted just a little in my life; but, upon my soul, I have met my match in this unsophisticated young girl you are in such a hurry to pity."

Frank was quick to see the look of grave disapproval which crept over Rose's half-averted face, as she silently toyed with her knife and fork, and looked impatiently to see if Harry was ready yet to return to their rooms. Frank rose when they did, presently, and walking by Rose's side, spoke again of the walk he had proposed.

"Come to us in about half an hour, and I will tell you. I am almost sure I can manage it," she said.

"Thank you," he replied with an earnest gravity which momentarily attracted her attention; add-



ing as she left him, "Do your best not to disappoint me, I especially wish a quiet morning away from all these people."

When he joined them, however, at the time appointed, he found Mrs. Ashton absorbed in planning various new occupations, in the way of elaborate embroidery, of curious design ; in arranging which she so evidently counted on Rose's assistance, that he saw at a glance their proposed walk would be out of the question that day. Not willing, however, to give it up without one remonstrance, Frank, after exchanging pleasant greetings with Mrs. Ashton, and listening courteously to her account of all she was proposing to do, said boldly, as though he did not dream of any objection,

"It will not disturb your plans, I hope, for Miss Ashton to take a walk with me before it grows much warmer."

"A walk?" she asked tranquilly. "Oh! Rose must not go to-day! I could not possibly do without her; she helps me so much always."

Scarcely could he conceal his irritation at this coolly selfish reply, so regardless of Rose's possible wishes; and he would still have urged his petition had not a warning gesture from Rose silenced him, as she said cheerfully,

"We will have our walk another day, Mr. Hilton ;

and really it will be better for you to have one day's rest from the duty of amusing me. I did not notice it before, but you do look a little pale and wearied."

"Do I?" he answered absently, while he pondered for an instant a resolution he had suddenly entertained, of seeking Harry's companionship, Harry's counsel, since the sweet sympathy he had first hoped for were thus withheld.

Rose had spoken half-jestingly at the moment ; but in the stronger light here Frank's assumed brightness failed to entirely conceal the look of depression which his pale features now wore. He had disguised this somewhat successfully, during the idle chatter which surrounded them at the breakfast-table, but here the little added burden of disappointment that Rose could not go with him tore aside the flimsy mask ; and she became seriously troubled as she looked now on his changed expression, his air of patient, hopeless apathy. He saw in her sudden, startled manner, and lips parted for eager questioning, how he had betrayed himself ; and yet felt too unnerved at the moment to bear even her tender touch upon the deep wound, so freshly reopened. Anticipating, therefore, the words he could not yet listen to calmly, he said hastily,

"I am out of sorts this morning, Miss Ashton, and had hoped your quieting influence would have cheered me up again. However, as Harry can be of no use in your present deliberations, I shall try to coax him to go with me. Will you come, old fellow?"

Something in his tone, his earnest appealing glance, suggested to Harry the strong desire which was veiled under these apparently light words; and he checked his first intended denial before it was uttered, saying cordially, as he rose to his feet,

"Just what I should like, Frank. I so seldom have the chance for a good long walk."

In very few minutes they were sauntering side by side down the broad avenue, whose first turning led them along a primitive forest-road, which they half-unconsciously took, as offering both shade and comparative solitude.

Neither was eager to break the long silence in which they began their walk. Harry felt as by instinct that his friend had some painful, unwelcome revelation to make, which he himself shrank a little from hearing—ready as he held himself always to give whatever of counsel or sympathy were needed. Frank having once broken the seal of silence, under which he had kept the long-

buried past, no longer felt his own strength sufficient to endure its remembrance or to meet future developments unaided. When at last he spoke, it was to ask a question so apparently trivial and irrelevant, that Harry stared gravely at him before answering.

"You heard nothing, Harry," he asked, "of these strange cries, either last night or before?"

"Nothing,"—adding, with a sudden guess at the truth, "Is it possible you did?"

"This last night, yes,"—making the admission with a gloomy reluctance his friend saw with regret and uneasiness.

"What was it like to you?" he asked slowly. "You ought to have some clearer idea about it than these timid nervous women!"

"I ought, yes! but yet—Harry, I can only describe it as very horrible."

"Horrible? Was it, then, some cry of human suffering?"

"How can I tell? To me it seemed far worse!"

"What could be worse? Surely Frank, you are above superstitious fears—"

"I thought I was; but—in fact, Harry, I don't know what to believe, I am so tortured with a fear I know not how to put in words."

Harry stopped, and looked in astonishment at

his friend's pale, agitated features, so full of intense pain.

"Frank—dear old friend," he said at length, with a deep tenderness of tone inexpressibly comforting to that suffering spirit. "There is some thing in this which is troubling you beyond all natural proportion. Tell me, what is this strange dread? What have you to do with this curious night-alarm, which I have thought so trifling?"

"You remember all the sad story I told you the other day of Agnes Headley?" asked Frank, after a brief pause, speaking in low husky tones, which betrayed the pain it gave him to utter that long-silent name.

"That unfortunate girl? Yes. But what—?"

"Knowing the cruel, vindictive spirit of the mother," interrupted Frank, gloomily forcing himself to go on with his narrative, "my first thought was to look for some contrivance of hers to at least startle and alarm us, if it was ascertained that neither dog, nor wild animal had made that cry. As only the Bradfords and your family, besides myself, occupy that wing of the house, I made up my mind to watch secretly last night, hoping, if the noise was repeated, I should thus detect its source."

"I wonder none of us heard it this time," observed Harry perplexedly.

"I must ask your forgiveness for that, Harry," returned his friend, half-smiling. "Believing it would be repeated, and dreading the effect of such a shock upon both your wife and sister, I took care to prevent their hearing it, by administering a harmless sleeping draught—"

"Ah, that Russian wine ! It is a wonder I did not suspect you at the time. But you might have left me out to share your vigil."

"I wish now I had !"

"Was it so very dreadful, then ?"

"I have wondered a little since if I have forever lost all my strength of nerve and will. I began so calmly and cheerfully, never anticipating a greater or more important discovery than some malicious attempt at annoyance from my one unrelenting enemy ; and even that I regarded more with contempt than anger, meaning to be contented with effectually stopping it. But as the hours passed on I became nervous, and filled with an irresistible horror. All sorts of strange fantastic imaginings took possession of me ; so that when the first cry actually came I was totally unnerved, and unfit for any action."

"It came more than once, then ?"

"Three times, as before, with very short intervals. I regained enough self-control to make sure

no living creature was anywhere near, within doors or without, when the second cry came ; which seemed close to my window, but at the third, which had a faint, wandering, far-off sound, all my courage and strength were gone."

He paused, as though unable to add another word ; while Harry said, in wondering pity at his friend's strange agitation,

"What was it, Frank ? What could so move you ?"

In hollow tones of horror he answered,

"I knew it then. It was Agnes' voice !"

"Frank !" cried Harry, in strong excitement now, turning suddenly towards his friend, and taking both his clinched hands in his warm grasp. "This is positive madness. What could that poor girl, dead and at peace these ten years, have to do with this actual material cry so many have heard besides yourself ? You have allowed yourself to dwell morbidly on that girl's sad fate, and to reproach yourself with its responsibility, until you are guilty of actual folly in adopting this new fantasy. Where are all your strength and manliness, that you show such pitiable weakness as this ?"

His indignant reproaches roused and steadied Frank as nothing else she could have done. With a look of sudden self-abasement, he said sadly,

"I see the weakness and folly almost as you do, Harry ; but still—"

"Don't think I do not feel sorry for the grief that made such a fancy possible, Frank ; only let me show you how wild and absurd is the notion you have allowed to take possession of you."

"I grant it all ; but what else—?"

"That remains to be discovered. When you are your own calm, reasonable self again, with your nerves cool and steady and your brain cleared of this rubbish, we will study together what it all means."

"You think an explanation possible?"

"Of course. Be reasonable, Frank. Don't you know, had any one else proclaimed this mystery to be supernatural, you would have been the first to ridicule the idea?"

"Upon my word, Harry, I have not in any way sought or cherished the notion. It would never have occurred to me if I had not recognized—"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. The precise tone of a woman's voice, supposed to be heard after ten years' silence, is less likely to be exactly remembered than it is to be pretty successfully imitated."

"You believe, then—"

"I do not absolutely believe anything except that you are very weakly yielding to this influence.

Whether it is the same or not, I cannot yet tell ; but it will be far more fatal than that which first wrecked your peace if you do not vigorously resist it."

Frank stood for a moment in profound thought. Then rousing himself as from a dream, he threw off with a visible effort the gloomy depression and morbid fatalism which had so clouded his brain and shackled all his energies ; looking ardently upon the faithful friend who had not shrunk from probing his weakness to its very depth, with healing force, he said, as they once more walked on, but now with more active, vigorous step,

"You are right, good true friend ! I have done with that weakness forever. Whatever this mystery may be, you and I will ferret it out ; and woe to that being, if of human race, who has intentionally caused it !"

CHAPTER XIV.

WITH a faint sensation of dreary pain Rose saw Frank and Harry start off on the walk she had so hoped to share ; and as she watched them slowly disappear beyond the masses of shrubbery which bounded the view from the window at which she stood, she almost unconsciously sighed, and cast one last regretful look in their direction, even while turning with assumed brightness to devote herself to her sister's caprice of the moment.

After some busy discussion of various minor particulars, Mrs. Ashton presently became weary of the unwonted exertions she was making, and leaning back in contented indolence upon the soft masses of cushions that surrounded her she said languidly,

"I will rest a little now, Rose, if you will take a look in the parlor for my white shawl ; I think I left it there last evening."

First shading the blinds to shut out the sun, which was beginning to be oppressively hot, and assuring herself of the invalid's entire comfort, Rose passed lightly from the room, not unwilling

to loiter over her errand in the cooler solitude she hoped to find in the parlors. In this, however, she was doomed to disappointment. Many of the inmates of the house still lingered there, chatting idly of various matters of passing interest before seeking their respective rooms.

As Rose entered, Mrs. Headley was saying, in sweet, condoling tones,

"It is very sad, Mrs. Bradford, you should be so persistently annoyed by this strange disturbance. It seems so very unaccountable."

With sudden paleness Rose paused for an instant in absolute dismay; then collecting her scattered forces, she earnestly, though with slightly trembling accents, addressed Mrs. Bradford:

"Have you indeed heard it again? I hoped there had been no return of that mysterious cry, since I did not hear it!"

"How could you sleep through it?" returned Mrs. Bradford shuddering. "It seemed to me even more distinct than before."

"Was it exactly the same cry?" asked Fred Maynard thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes! at least I believe there was a little difference. It was more prolonged—a far more dreary sound."

"It is curious," observed Mrs. Headley, "that

this should happen just now. Has there been no sign of this mysterious visitant before?"

"Not that I have ever heard of," returned Mrs. Bradford, "and we have been here nearly two months."

"I think, Mrs. Headley," interposed Fred Maynard jestingly, "that it must have come in your train. Are you in the habit of having spiritual attendants?"

"Oh, hush, Mr. Maynard," she interrupted, in very distressed tones, "you suggest such a terrible fear—!"

"But surely!" eagerly cried Mrs. Wayland, with a good-natured attempt at reassurance, "this cry, if it is supernatural, can have no reference to you, since your windows are at the other side of the house, so that you do not hear it!"

"True," replied Mrs. Headley, with seeming hesitation and confusion; "but then, if meant for a warning or reproach, it might not be addressed to any of us."

"But to whom, then?" began Fred Maynard, puzzled by these singular words.

"Pardon me!" she exclaimed, rising in great agitation of manner; "I really cannot bear this thought. It revives too painfully the bitter past."

And with a hurried gesture, summoning her

husband to her side, taking his arm with an air of deep affliction, and beckoning her son and daughter to accompany her, she swept droopingly from the room.

With an air of positive stupefaction Fred Maynard watched this extraordinary retreat, exclaiming as they disappeared,

"Upon my soul, I would like to understand what all this means!"

"I can tell you," answered Mrs. Wayland with affected reluctance; "but it is a very sad story."

"Let us have it, nevertheless. We have so supped on horrors these last two days, the most doleful story will seem cheerful by contrast."

"It is the old, old story of a broken heart," returned Mrs. Wayland sentimentally.

"Are we to believe any heart of Headley origin could be tender enough to break?" he interrupted scoffingly.

"Hush, railer!" she answered, with real reproach. "This is not a fictitious tale. It seems there was an elder daughter named Agnes, who would appear to have been a pretty, interesting creature, and who was engaged, ever so many years ago, to Mr. Hilton—"

She paused as one or two characteristic exclamations interrupted her, not failing covertly to ob-

serve Rose's sudden start, her hurried breathing as she strove to seem unconcerned, to assume a proud indifference, to avoid betraying the pained, half-incredulous interest she felt in the relation.

"Do go on, Mrs. Wayland!" impatiently cried Fred Maynard; "what tragedy intervened to save him from such an undesirable connection?"

"It really was a tragedy," she replied, gravely and rebukingly. "They became engaged on board the steamer; and when they reached the other side Agnes Headley had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" echoed several voices; while Fred Maynard added, in incredulous horror, "Nonsense! people cannot disappear in that way in real life. Who could have told such an improbable story?"

"I had the very best of authority," she answered, with pique and irritation. "Robert Headley told me first of it, and his mother gave me further particulars afterwards."

"But what do you mean by 'disappeared'?" asked Mrs. Bradford; "was it an accident, or did she run away on landing?"

"It was called an accident," somewhat cautiously answered Mrs. Wayland.

"How absurd!" exclaimed Fred Maynard half-

angrily. "I suppose those horrid people want to insinuate that Hilton made way with her!"

"Oh no!" reproachfully cried Mrs. Wayland. "They said it was a dreadful grief to him; that he has never got over it in all these years. The girl quite evidently went overboard in the darkness of the night; and not being missed till next morning all search for her was fruitless."

A moment's silence showed how strongly all were impressed with this sad story. Then Fred Maynard said, meditatively,

"Still it is a curious kind of an accident to happen on board a large ocean steamer. On a small boat, in a storm, it might have been possible—"

"Well, it was thought," said Mrs. Wayland hesitatingly, "that the girl, in a moment of excitement, might have—"

"Thrown herself overboard?" laughed Fred Maynard bitterly. "Is it likely a young girl, in all the happiness of a newly-formed engagement, would commit an act so desperate as that? Not many men, in the most hopeless circumstances, would have the nerve for it, let me tell you."

"That may be," she answered pettishly, "but the girl was half out of her senses with hearing some cruel speech of her fickle lover's. It would seem he had rather trifled with her, and was al-

ready repenting his bonds, and she was just mad with the shame and misery of finding it out."

Rose had listened to all this with horror and gathering indignation; controlling herself still, however, to receive in contemptuous silence the narrative to which she did not give the least credence. Now, unable longer to endure the continuance of this trial of her faith in the honor and manliness of Frank Hilton, she interposed with proud warmth,

"A very strange story, indeed, Mrs. Wayland; and as told of one so high in our esteem as Mr. Hilton, you must acknowledge how utterly incredible it is."

And without waiting for any answer she left the room with even more than her usual self-poised grace of mien; while Mrs. Bradford, gathering up her work, rose to follow her example, saying, with cold disapproval of tone and manner,

"Neither do I believe it! I remember hearing years ago of Agnes Headley's death under some mysterious circumstances, which were never explained, but were understood to reflect seriously on Mrs. Headley. It seems Agnes was not her own child, and was always regarded as a trouble and a burden. However she may have died, poor child, they were doubtless glad to be rid of her;

And if Mr. Hilton even knew them, or had shown any interest in the girl, I should need better evidence than the stepmother's word to believe he was in the least degree implicated in her death."

"And yet," said Fred Maynard, "Mrs. Headley, as I see now, meant to suggest that mysterious cry to have been intended for Hilton, as a warning, I suppose, from Agnes herself."

"She may have intended to give that impression," replied Mrs. Bradford indignantly; "but horrible as the cry was, painfully as it affected all who heard it, I can never believe it was Agnes Headley's spirit returned to torment Mr. Hilton. No such absurd superstition—"

She paused suddenly, gravely shocked as Rose stood by her side, with strangely gleaming eyes, and lips absolutely colorless with intense feeling.

Rose had remembered, as she advanced some paces along the hall, the white shawl in search of which she had originally come to the parlors; and retracing her steps hastily had re-entered unperceived. Just as she was passing the group, with the recovered shawl on her arm, these last words caught her attention, and showed the brutal design which had prompted Mrs. Headley in skillfully suggesting the idea which Mrs. Bradford so indignantly repudiated.

Rose's lips slightly parted as though she would have spoken; but they quivered so that the attempted utterance was vain. Mrs. Bradford, grieved for the girl's evident pain, and dreading the possible exaggeration of meaning which the others would attach to it, quickly turned so as to screen her from close observation while she drew her hand within in her arm, and with a friendly, warning glance led her quietly from the room.

As they slowly ascended the stairs towards their own apartments, Mrs. Bradford said gently,

"Do not let this so disturb you, dear Miss Ashton. I would sooner believe this mystery to be some wicked contrivance of Mrs. Headley herself than adopt this cruel and absurd idea she has so ingeniously prompted. Mr. Bradford speaks of her as unscrupulous beyond belief, and from the first has urged me to avoid her as much as possible."

"Still," murmured Rose, with an irrepressible shudder, "while I could never believe all that terrible story, may there not have been something—?"

"That reflects upon Mr. Hilton?" asked Mrs. Bradford impetuously.

"Oh no! not that; but some complication—"

"He may have known them, and even have been engaged to the girl. They may easily have maneuvered him into that, young as he must have

been then ; but that he is at all censurable, I cannot believe. Ask your brother, who has known Mr. Hilton so well. He will tell you to trust in him still."

Very sadly Rose pondered for an instant, and then said wearily,

"How much of evil and discomfort have already followed the Headleys' arrival!"

"You must not be so easily depressed by this. We did have much more peace and repose before ; but perhaps if they find themselves not cordially received, they may not stay long enough to really trouble us much."

"But how dreadfully Mr. Hilton would feel this cruel theory ;" said Rose irrelevantly, seeming scarcely to have heard Mrs. Bradford's last words. "Fortunately he has not yet heard that cry himself."

"Possibly he never will," replied Mrs. Bradford soothingly. "It may never come again, and certainly no one will dare express to him this new interpretation of it."

"I hope not!" And with but few more words they parted.

Rose found, with great relief, that Mrs. Ashton had fallen asleep in her absence, and so she could seek at once the solitude of her own room, and

try to recover there control of both nerves and spirits.

As the prompt and generous indignation with which she had at first impetuously rejected Mrs. Wayland's narrative, as far as it concerned Frank Hilton, gradually subsided, while she still clung absolutely to her entire faith in him, yet an indefinite uneasiness crept slowly into her heart, whose nature she scarcely comprehended. That he had known the Headleys formerly, that some bitterly painful memory was connected with the past, she knew from his own lips ; but so vaguely had he spoken of its nature, so frankly saying it was not a story for her ears, that she felt now lost in a frightful maze of doubt and speculation. Not daring to question him, lest it should lead to the revelation of that morning's discussion, so fraught with new pain and bitterness for him, fearing for the same reason to speak even to her brother on the subject—she sat all the remaining weary moments of their absence at her window, watching for the first sign of their approach in a new horror of her solitude ; yet scarcely knowing how their presence could comfort her or relieve the doubts and fears she should not dare to express.

When at last their longed-for appearance greeted her eyes, she could not resist the impulse to go

out and meet them. Her approach as they stood resting for a moment under the shade of some trees startled both ; so evident was her recent agitation through all her efforts at calmness.

Replying to Harry's eager inquiries that Clare was still quietly sleeping, with a mournful smile at his impetuosity in hastily leaving them—to satisfy himself with his own eyes of the comfort of that one dear, all-absorbing object—Rose would gladly have followed him ; shrinking sensitively from the earnest, pleading gaze which Frank turned upon her, as she stood hesitating by his side. He quickly detected this feeling, however, even while observing with keen regret the shadows which had chased all the color and brightness from her face ; and he spoke with anxiety.

“What is it, Miss Ashton?—what new trouble or dread has so changed you since this morning?”

“You must not ask me,” she faltered in confusion. “It is nothing I could tell you, or which really deserves a moment's thought.”

“That which has so pained and grieved you could not be a trifle,” he answered in grave remonstrance. “If you will not trust me with it—”

“Oh, it is not that ! I could trust you always ; only—”

“Tell me,” with sudden dread, “does it in any

way concern me? have the slanders I anticipated reached your ears at last?"

"Could I listen for one instant to a slander of you?" she replied, with a vain attempt at evasion.

"You may nobly have refused to listen," he answered with despondent gloom, "but still you do not know how I dread your hearing the cruel story, of which I see only too clearly a part, at least, has already—"

"No!" she cried eagerly, deeply touched by his manner. "I give you my word, I have heard nothing which does not rather raise you in my esteem."

"Will you tell me what you have heard?" he asked. A sudden flush came over her face, and she looked down shyly as she answered,

"I cannot. It was such a cruel yet incredible story."

"At least," he pleaded, "will you tell Harry? He knows all the truth; he can tell you what to believe."

"I know that already," she replied, looking up at him with a proud, confident gaze, which strengthened and comforted him.

"Still, it is best you should ask him," he answered, deeply moved by her perfect trust. "I have not been entirely sinless, as I told you before ;


but you may trust me, I have no need to be ashamed before the presence of these people who so bitterly attack me."

"They can never shake my faith in you," she replied simply, frankly giving her hand to his parting clasp as she left him.

CHAPTER XV.

THERE was a slight hush of expectation among the guests of the house, as they assembled at the dinner-table that evening, when Frank Hilton entered the room, and walked quietly to his place. So many busy tongues had wagged in a buzz of excitement over the revelations half-made, half-intimated, in which Mrs. Headley had sought to cover him with a mantle of disgrace, that, few as the hours were since the quiet morning-meal at which he had occupied the position of an ordinary human being, it seemed to all to have taken a much longer time to raise him upon the not very enviable pinnacle of fame on which he now appeared to stand, and challenge their criticisms.

Rose feeling instinctively how every eye was turned upon him, as he approached, was full of indignant sympathy for the painful embarrassment she supposed he would experience; and raised her own eyes towards his as he took his seat, meaning thus mutely to express some consoling kindness. She was almost startled, however, at the open, smiling serenity of his brow, his air



of perfect composure and self-respect. She did not comprehend how, now that the struggle was actually upon him, the ordeal was really past, and he had thrown aside all the morbid sensitiveness which had inspired such disproportionate dread of what might happen. The possibly cruel comments that careless, thoughtless people would make upon that dark hour of his past, which he had so zealously guarded hitherto from all profane touch or knowledge, he could now face calmly. Aroused by Ashton's friendship and strong good-sense, and sustained by his own manliness, he was ready to meet whatever reproach or even bitterer scorn and coldness might be his present fate; and so resolving, found his heart immeasurably lightened of its wearying burden. Neither were the looks he encountered altogether unfriendly. Curious and questioning they were, almost unavoidably; but his calm, frank bearing, even at the second glance, inspired unconsciously, almost against their wills, renewed confidence in the minds of those who were most subtly prepared to judge him unkindly.

As Rose with thoughtfulness murmured some words of pleasant greeting, Frank had only time to acknowledge them with a look of thanks, when Mrs. Wayland, who was a good-hearted little soul,

with all her frivolous absurdity, asked him, with her usual impetuosity,

"O, Mr. Hilton! I have been waiting to ask you if you have seen Mr. Maynard this afternoon."

"Maynard!" he repeated, surprised. "No, not since this morning, I think. Was there not some idea of a boating-party?"

"O yes!" she answered impatiently, "his friend Alfred Cameron came for him to go rowing with him; but they must surely have returned!"

"I don't believe they have," he replied carelessly. "They are most likely to have landed somewhere for lunch, and to have waited for evening before coming back. It would have been very warm rowing this afternoon."

"But they would not keep Miss Headley out all day."

"Miss Headley?" interposed Harry Ashton, with grave surprise. "Is it possible she went with them?"

"Well, poor child! I don't think she considered how it would look," began Mrs. Wayland.

"You must be mistaken, Mrs. Wayland," observed Mrs. Ashton tranquilly. "No young girl would go out alone with two young men in that way."

"I assure you, Mrs. Ashton," answered Mrs.

Wayland, with a degree of chafing and irritation which faintly amused Harry, as he complacently watched her fair face becoming flushed and clouded now, "I assure you Miss Headley did positively go: I know it beyond a doubt."

"Well, then, I can only say her mother ought not to have allowed it," replied Mrs. Ashton indifferently.

"Why, it was all her doing!" explained the little widow in tones of annoyance.

"How so?" asked Harry gravely.

"Why, Mrs. Headley and her daughter were with me on the piazza, when Alfred Cameron came up; and after Mr. Maynard came out, and the young men arranged to have a row, Miss Headley exclaimed that she would like so much to go with them. Of course they said they would be very happy to take her, and the mother only said, 'Dear Kate is such a foolish, spoiled child! Will you really be troubled with her? It is so very kind!' and all that sort of thing; and so they went off together."

"What a mother!" exclaimed Harry Ashton indignantly. "To send that young, inexperienced girl off with those two men in that way! Maynard is well enough, but Cameron is not a fit ac-

quaintance for her. I wonder you did not remonstrate, Mrs. Wayland."

"I?" asked the fair widow, shrugging her shoulders with coquettish grace. "She would neither have thanked nor listened to me if I had. I was not going to burn my fingers by meddling."

"It is simply beyond belief," muttered Harry. "If she had even taken her brother with her—"

He stopped, as he saw a deep flush suddenly suffuse Mrs. Wayland's countenance, while she nervously fingered her napkin-ring, and looked away with some embarrassment.

"O, the brother was with Mrs. Wayland," placidly observed Mrs. Ashton. "I happened to be sitting near my window, and saw them wandering away together."

An awkward pause followed, which no one seemed inclined to break. Mrs. Wayland's walk with Robert Headley would scarcely have attracted attention, but for her singular confusion in having it made known; and the thoughts of all were busy for a moment with the inadequateness of her embarrassment as compared with its apparently simple, trivial cause.

Presently Fred Maynard entered hastily, and came briskly towards his place at the table, with evidently assumed insouciance. All acknowledged

his salutations with various characteristic expressions ; but none seemed inclined to approach the subject so recently discussed, till at last Mrs. Wayland said petulantly,

"Well, Mr. Maynard, you had of course a pleasant row with the companions you were so lucky as to secure?"

"O, charming !" he replied nonchalantly.

"And have you only just now returned?"

"Only this moment ;" adding, as if in anticipation of her further questioning, "we landed down at the Point, and rested there during the heat of the day, and came back quite leisurely—as late as we could and not miss dinner."

"How hungry you must be !" with ironical compassion.

"Not at all. We had a very nice lunch at the hotel down there."

"But where is Cameron?" suddenly asked Harry, to cover the blank pause, in which the ladies looked at each other, in grave disapproval of this new feature of Miss Headley's imprudence.

"O, he left us at his own landing. I wanted him to come to dinner here ; but he said he had a party waiting for him at home."

At this Mrs. Wayland coquettishly exclaimed,

"What wicked creatures you men are ! How

little you think of the severe remarks to which you so carelessly expose those who trust you !”

“Not at all,” he replied warmly and indignantly. “We would not have asked any lady to go with us on such an expedition ; but—”

“Yes, of course you will take shelter under the mother’s extraordinary imprudence. But after all, where is the girl herself ? I do not see her in her place.”

“O,” speaking carelessly, to conceal a little confusion, “she got her feet wet getting out of the boat, and hurt her arm a little, as she stumbled ; and so I suppose it takes somewhat longer to make her toilet.”

“You selfish, indifferent wretch !” cried Mrs. Wayland, with a slight gleam of pleasure flashing through her assumed wrath. “How could you let her meet such disasters while in your care ? And having done it, how could you have the face to come to dinner before her repairs were effected ?”

“Well, why not ? I could not do her any good by waiting ; and even her mother would not let me assist in that performance, I suppose.”

Gravely annoyed and embarrassed as this conversation proceeded, Rose now turned a shy, flushed face towards Frank, saying hurriedly,

“You must come in this evening and see Clare’s

new work. I think even to your unæsthetic soul it will be attractive."

"Have you made such progress, then, in drawing your designs as to have any work already begun?"

"O, yes," interrupted Mrs. Ashton, leaning forward to answer him. "I know you think I never do anything; but really, in fancy-work, I do not believe there is one lady in the house who actually accomplishes what I do. You see the others wander about through the parlors and into each other's rooms, embroidery in hand, so intent on discussing very different matters that they do very little sewing, while I quietly in my own room really work, even if for only an hour or so at a time."

"That is the true way," he replied, smiling at the earnest expression which brightened the face so often clouded with weariness and discontent.

"You mean that as a reflection on me," observed Rose, with a sly smile, "because I never actually do anything—"

"No indeed," he answered hastily, in lower tones. "When you are with me your work is only meant for a pretext of employment, in the intervals of reading, or when troublesome people come to interrupt us. I never really mean you to spend more than a passing moment upon it."

"How condescending!" with mock resentment; adding, with complete change of tone, "I am so intensely weary of all this, that I mean to escape further infliction. I will see you this evening."

"Must you go?" he answered with regret as she rose from her seat, after some hurried words to Mrs. Ashton.

"I must indeed; I am nervous, tired, cross—everything that is disagreeable," giving him, nevertheless, a lovely, though fleeting smile, which did not quite veil from his observation her quivering lips and drooping eyes.

A pleasant, tranquil evening in the Ashtons' apartments soothed and cheered all those wearied spirits, so harassed with the burden of the day's excitements. As they parted for the night, and Frank stood for an instant in the corridor at Rose's door, she made a visible effort to say, though with shy, downcast looks, and a deepening flush on her cheek,

"Harry has told me all that sad story, Mr. Hilton; and I wanted to have you know how sorry I am for all you have suffered, and how unjust you must have been to yourself—"

"Do not say that," he entreated eagerly; "your sympathy is very dear to me, but you must not try

to ignore my own wrongdoing. Had I only possessed moral courage—”

“How could it be expected at your age? How could you cope with the subtlety to which you have seen Mr. Maynard yield to-day?”

“It was an unfair trial,” he acknowledged; “but still it does not excuse the yielding.”

“Perhaps not, quite,” she admitted reluctantly; “but at least it absolves you from all intention of wrong.”

“Can that be so,” he answered gloomily, “when the actual facts, however perverted, are judged so harshly as you saw to-day?”

“Such malice can never affect any one’s opinion permanently, however active and vindictive it may be.”

“Be that as it may,” he answered resolutely. “The ordeal I have so dreaded is over forever; and I can ‘thank God and take courage’ now, content to face any result while your faith and Harry’s are still mine.”

“You may count upon them always,” she replied softly. Yet she spoke with an enthusiasm of look and voice, as she noticed his firm, self-reliant gaze, which told of new confidence, and that the hour of doubt and weakness for him was gone forever.

"It is not often," he answered, with grateful warmth, "that one goes through the world mourning so many years over the result of one wrong act, and then, after such a weary penance, finds so much brightness, such utter content, in loyal, true friendship like yours."

"Does it so comfort you?" she asked, suddenly raising her eyes, sparkling with unshed tears of deep emotion.

"Unspeakably!" he replied fervently. "It is like floating into calm and smiling waters, brightened by glorious sunlight, after struggling through storms and turbulent waves which have almost engulfed the soul."

A sudden tremor agitated Rose, as she felt how truly though strongly he spoke; she realized how bitter had been his life, how dark and hopeless the future must have been while awaiting the bursting of the storm, so long impending, and only partially averted now.

At this moment Harry came out of his room, and, unobservant at first of Rose's presence, said hastily to his friend,

"Are you all ready for our watch, Frank?"

"Your watch!" exclaimed Rose, startled and curious at these unexpected words. Then, as they looked perplexedly at each other, she added eagerly,

"Is it possible you mean to watch to-night, hoping to discover the cause of that dreadful cry?"

After an instant's hesitation, Frank replied lightly,

"We must take you into our confidence, I see. We did mean, just for a frolic, to sit up in my room for a while, to see if anything would happen; but I am sorry you found us out."

"And I am very glad of it," she answered quickly. "Do you know I had secretly meant to do so myself; and it will give me greater courage to know you are awake and watching too."


"But surely you will not need to keep awake if we do," Hilton pleaded earnestly. "What is merely an amusement to us, would be very exhausting to you."

"Not at all!" shaking her head willfully. I shall make myself comfortable with a book until all other lights are out, and then I will extinguish mine and begin my watch. If nothing happens, I can go to sleep towards morning, and get rest enough."

And as she would listen to no persuasions, but demanded, with pretty insistence, their submission to her will, they were compelled to have it so arranged.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE vigil to Frank Hilton and Harry Ashton was very far from resembling the dreary, depressing experience which had been Hilton's fate the night before. Then, alone, with his bitter memories of a desolate past,—dreading he knew not what of present evil,—unnerved, unmanned by the vague horrors which surrounded him, he had weakly succumbed to the seeming supernaturalness of that mournful wail. Now, with all these superstitious fears swept away ; crushing beneath his feet with a resolute tread the morbid weakness of his past brooding and self-tormenting, he could calmly, and even cheerfully, sit in the utter gloom of his room, with his friend close at hand, and talk with him tranquilly in subdued tones behind the shaded blinds, while they even brightened their solitude with occasional cigars. Thus to them the hours fled pleasantly by ; and it was with an almost exhilarating excitement that they noted the cessation of each household sound, till at last the blank stillness warned them of the approach of that mystic hour when suddenly might



break upon the air that cry, whose first utterance would be the signal for the investigation they were prepared to make.

Not quite so blithely passed the hours to Rose. Sitting quietly, and still fully dressed, by her window, she occupied herself with a book, until the growing stillness warned her to put it down. Then wrapping herself in a light shawl, which the deepening chill of the night air rendered necessary, she extinguished her light, and resumed her seat, with a little nervous tremor, as she felt suddenly a dreary loneliness, born of the entire silence and gloom which surrounded her. Straining her ears with an impulsive longing for some intimation of friendly human presence, she could faintly detect the low murmuring sound of Frank's voice from the adjoining window; and trifling as was this comfort, she could now brace her quivering nerves with the assurance of certain succor and companionship being so near at hand, and tranquilly watch the stars and slowly waving branches as she looked from the window.

So, hour after hour, as announced by the distant village clock, passed by in measured silence; and oppressed by the unwonted watching, weary of waiting for the sound she now almost hoped for rather than feared, Rose drooped languidly for-

ward, and resting her head against the side of the window, yielded to the extreme drowsiness which weighed down her eyelids. She was almost slumbering, in fact, yet not quite relaxing her intent listening, when that fearful wail came shuddering by upon the air, with its long, low, inexpressibly mournful sound. As though suddenly electrified, Rose started to her feet, and stood listening, with wildly beating heart, and trembling in every limb, as she grasped the arm of her chair for support. At the same instant she heard a light, almost imperceptible sound, passing, as it seemed, swiftly through the corridor, and with a sudden sense of actual fear she sank again helplessly into the chair from which she had risen.

Only for a moment, however, did she permit this sensation to overcome her. Rising then resolutely, and summoning all her fortitude, she softly crossed her room, and noiselessly opening the door, looked out into the corridor. It seemed utterly silent and deserted, and in the intense gloom no object could possibly be discerned. Rose was just withdrawing into her room again, wondering whether she should tell Harry of what she had heard, when again that sad wail broke upon her ears with as keen a shock as ever. She faintly

gasped for breath as she clung to the half-open door, nerving herself to endure again the same long wavering cry, with its shrilly rising and mournfully falling cadences. But it broke off abruptly this time, with a curious tremor of sound—and then came an unmistakable sneeze!

Almost hysterical with the sudden revulsion of feeling, Rose turned quickly to procure a light, meaning then to summon the other watchers. At the same instant, however, Frank softly but hastily opened his own door, and appeared, light in hand, before her. Startled at beholding her standing there so unexpectedly, he exclaimed anxiously, as he looked in her agitated face, not quite comprehending the nature of her emotion,

“What is it, Miss Ashton? You should not be here, alone, in the darkness.”

“You must have heard—” she began, with an effort which gravely troubled him.

“Those cries? Yes,” he answered quickly. “Harry went down-stairs to watch there—”

“Ah!” with a long breath of relief. “It was then his step—”

A confused outcry from below, and voices speaking in suppressed excitement interrupted her utterance; and she leaned against the doorway—so pale that Frank looked at her in utter dismay.

Almost instantly, however, she regained her self-control by a brave effort, and took a step forward, saying rapidly,

"I hear Harry's voice. Let us go to him."

"Not you, Miss Ashton! I entreat you—"

But with an insistant gesture she glided past him, and he could only follow hastily as she flitted down the staircase.

Below, all was still in darkness; but guided by the voices still audible, though strangely confused, they entered the parlors, where the flashing light which Frank carried revealed an extraordinary group.

Harry, guided only by the faintly marked outline of a window, which had been thrown wide open, had noiselessly entered the parlors, and approached the figure he saw dimly standing in the semi-obscurity, just as the second cry so curiously terminated in a sneeze.

Comprehending now pretty certainly the whole infamous plot, and intent only on securing the still unknown actor in it, he had promptly grasped the arm nearest him, as he exclaimed angrily,

"What does all this mean?"

His approach had been so unexpected, that the first reply was a faint scream, as his captive struggled to escape with a degree of vigor not to have

been looked for, since the dress betrayed the presence of a woman. Finding resistance ineffectual, she remained passive in his grasp, while she asked in tones still trembling with fear, which he recognized as Mrs. Headley's,

"Who are you? I have been so dreadfully frightened!"

"Indeed," he answered sarcastically. "You seem also to have taken cold, judging by your sneeze."

"Oh, what was that cry!" she asked pathetically, ignoring his remark, as she regained by an effort all her coolness and self-possession.

Frank's entrance with his light, followed by Rose, now caused the detected, treacherous creature, with all her nerve and boldness, to shrink and cower away in desperate fear, as her white, trembling lips vainly sought to utter disjointed words, in which she would have attempted some self-defense.

After a moment's pause Frank put down his light upon the table, and even waited to offer Rose a seat before he would in any way notice Mrs. Headley, who looked at him with a sort of desperate effrontery.

Then, fixing his eyes upon her with contemptuous sternness, he said abruptly,

"So, you would not be warned!"

"What do you mean?" she managed to ask, trying to seem unconscious of his meaning.

"You know well enough. How have you dared attempt this infamous masquerading?"

"Surely," she gasped nervously, "you do not imagine—"

"Silence!" he cried, with a sudden burst of anger, "I needed but to suspect you, and to be on my guard, to recognize clearly your voice, with all its disguise; even as I knew there could be no one else capable of such fiendish conduct."

"You cruelly misjudge me," she answered with plaintive submissiveness, striving to control her features, so convulsed with terror, into the expression she desired them to wear. "I give you my word—"

"Your word!" he interrupted, scornfully. "It is too utterly worthless. I do not care to bandy words with you. You have dared to brave me—to attempt to defame me here, as formerly, when in my simple youth I only knew how to suffer and be silent. All this I might forgive, or at least leave unpunished; but your last vile act, seeking to frighten innocent souls with supernatural terrors, daring even to simulate poor dead Agnes' voice—"

His voice broke with sudden pain and emotion, and as he turned away, Rose, full of pity, came softly to his side and murmured in her sweet tones,

"All this is too much for you. Let this wretched woman go; she can never really harm you; and let all this be as a dream from which we have happily awakened."

"Dear, sweet friend," he replied passionately, yet under his breath, "your divine pity would soothe and comfort me were I far more desponding and wretched than I have ever been."

Harry, never very impetuous or demonstrative, had stood thus far quietly by the side of his captive, having released her arm as Frank came forward with the light, and remaining an apparently passive spectator of the scene. But his attention was keenly fixed upon all that passed, and no detail or incident escaped his notice. He had listened with amused curiosity to Mrs. Headley's confused endeavors to escape actual conviction of her evident guilt, but now as she seemed momentarily silenced by Frank's indignant outburst, he was quick to see the sudden half-veiled gleam of bitter vindictiveness which flashed in her eyes as they rested on Rose while she spoke to Frank in an undertone.

Roused again to indignant contempt towards

this woman, whom even a humiliating exposure could not subdue, he addressed her sharply,

"Well, Mrs. Headley, how are we to punish your atrocious conduct?"

"Mine?" she exclaimed, with well-acted surprise. "Surely, Mr. Ashton, you do not share in Mr. Hilton's absurd notion! You do not believe—"

"How else would you account for your presence here, so long after midnight, and for that open window?" he sternly rejoined.

"I might as well ask why you are all here!" she replied with bold sarcasm. "Alarmed, as I suppose you were, by that strange cry, I came here, guided by the sound, to—"

"Nonsense!" he answered impatiently; "your rooms are too far off for you to have heard it there."

"Nevertheless I did," she persisted coolly, "and finding the window open—"

"Enough of this!" interrupted Frank, at the sound of whose voice she shuddered, and turned her eyes away as though she could not meet the scorn which flashed in his. "No excuse or falsehood will serve you now. Caught in the very act, there is no longer any question of your guilt. It only remains to be considered whether we will leave you to the punishment the law would inflict, or be content with your immediate departure."

"That would be enough, I should think," observed Harry. "Get rid of her, and leave her to her own conscience."

"Her conscience!" interrupted Frank, with a short laugh. It expressed such intense scorn, that, goaded beyond endurance by its sting, she flashed upon him a look of defeated yet threatening rage, so that Rose turned away with a tremor of deep apprehension, and Harry took a step nearer his friend, as though to protect him from some new danger.

Before he could speak, however, Mrs. Headley, veiling that ominous glance beneath an expression of gentle reproach and submissive sadness, said, in the soft, pathetic accents she knew so well how to assume,

"How hard and cruel you would be to a real criminal, Mr. Hilton, when you presume thus upon the forbearance that you learned of old I should always show you. I would defy you now to assert or prove anything against me; but, for the memory of my poor Agnes—"

"Hush!" he interposed imperatively; "do not dare take that name upon your profane lips."

"Madman!" she uttered softly, with a deep sigh; then adding, with an air of resignation, "We only came here for a few days, and will leave to-mor-

row or next day. So, unless you detain us by pressing this absurd charge—”

“That will do,” he said abruptly, turning away from her unceremoniously. “Come, Miss Ashton ; come, Harry : let us go to our rooms again. That woman’s presence poisons the very air we breathe.”

Restraining, at his friend’s glance of impatient entreaty, the words which trembled on his lips, Ashton silently followed the others up the staircase and along the silent corridor, which faintly echoed their subdued footsteps, till they paused at length at their own rooms.

Here they entreated Rose to retire at once, and seek even at that late hour such repose as would be possible before day.

As she complied, and with drooping, languid air and darkly shadowed eyes closed her door upon them, Frank said entreatingly,

“Come to my room for a while, Harry. I could not sleep ; and I am wild with many bitter thoughts and fears I must tell you of.”

“Don’t think me unkind, old fellow, if I say no. All this has completely unhinged you, and no further discussion will do you any good now. Wait till to-morrow, when we shall be fresh and strong again—ready to cope easily with the situation, of which we already have tolerable control.”

"I suppose you are right," he answered reluctantly ; "and yet as these present petty little vexations seem fading away, they leave a bitter sting I dread still. If I could only put that cruel past forever out of my memory !"

"And why not ?" with grave surprise ; "what is left now of its pain ?"

"Of the old pain, nothing ; but there grows out of it a new dread, a suggestion of future bitterness and despair I know not how to meet."

"Dear old Frank, are you growing morbid again ? Will you never accept peace and comfort unmarred by such imaginary fears ?"

"They are not imaginary," he replied gloomily.

"You are not indeed in a mood for rest," said Harry, looking perplexedly at his friend. "Tell me what this new trouble is," he added, as they now entered Frank's room, and resumed their former seats by the window.

Frank remained for some moments silent, resting his head wearily on his hands, and looking so despondent and unhappy, that Harry repeated, with all his wonted kindness,

"Tell me, Frank—trust me still with all your grief."

He raised his head abruptly, saying impetuously,

"How does all the story I have told you affect

you, Harry? How far do you condemn as well as pity me?"

"Condemn, dear fellow? What an absurd notion! Have you not in every particular acted with the utmost honor and good principle? Could I have censured you even had you refused to sacrifice yourself as you did?"

"Still, am I not contaminated by it all? If not in your kindly thoughts, at least before the world?"

"Never! The world would be even more lenient than I. Trust me, Frank; I have admired rather than censured you in this matter."

"Still—if I dared to aspire!"

"What do you mean, Frank? What is this you so strangely fear to speak?"

"Have you never thought, Harry," with sudden desperation of speech, "that your sister's sweet companionship might take deep hold upon me?"

"Rose?" ejaculated Harry, profoundly astonished. "Do you mean—?"

"Don't reproach me, Harry!" he interrupted eagerly. "I never dreamed of my danger till this night as we stood there in the parlor, when the truth flashed suddenly upon me."

"I never thought of reproaching you, Frank," he answered tranquilly; "only you took me so by surprise. Of course you have no idea how Rose—"

"I have not dared think of that!" while a dark flush mounted slowly to his brow. "Remembering Agnes, could I presume to approach your sister with a love so—"

"Nonsense, Frank! There is nothing in that story which unfits you for the love of any woman. It is a curious thing that a man never has any sort of ideas about his sister on such a subject; but still, if Rose cares for you, old fellow, I know no one worthier of her; and she is a good, loving soul, well deserving all your regard."

"You would not then object?" grasping his friend's hand with eager delight.

"Of course not. Gain but her consent. You have mine in advance, and my best wishes too."

"But she may think differently," with renewed doubt.

"Possibly she may," said Ashton, laughing heartily as he rose to bid his friend good-night, "but it is your affair to overcome that little difficulty."

"If I only can!" answered Frank fervently as they parted.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE next day was one of gloom, depression, and disappointment to very many of the inmates of Arlington House, and its hours dragged wearily on, seeming of almost interminable length to their longing or impatient souls.

The weary midnight vigil, with its unwonted fatigues, its strong excitements, and painful reaction, told terribly on Rose's fragile physique; and utterly prostrated, with every nerve exhausted, every energy crushed, she lay restlessly tossing through all the dreary hours of sultriness and discomfort, only gaining, as the approach of evening brought a refreshing coolness on its dewy wings, a light but healing slumber, from which she awoke, still languid, yet at comparative ease. Rising then, and making a hurried toilet, she came out to their sitting-room, hoping by some hours of tranquil conversation to quiet her still trembling nerves and regain her wonted cheerfulness.

Frank Hilton had wandered desperately about all day, terribly depressed at Rose's illness, and

alarmed as each hour passed and she still remained within her room. At one moment, buoyed up by bright illusive dreams, he would be wild to look into her sweet face, watching for the conscious flush, the bewitching tremulous tones, the downcast eyes, which might indicate the faintly dawning interest he scarcely dared hope he might have inspired. Then, tormenting himself with absurd doubts and fears; fancying she had, in an unguarded moment, gained an unwelcome glimpse of his growing tenderness, so fast becoming beyond his power to conceal, he imagined she purposely secluded herself from his presence in disapproval of his passion. A brief hour with Mrs. Ashton, whose manifest improvement in nervous tone and strength not only rendered her now a pleasanter companion, but made constant attendance no longer a necessity, occupied part of his morning. Afterward, not caring to come in contact with the Headleys, who were understood to be arranging for further journeyings the next day, he persuaded Harry to go off with him for a long walk. They needed especially to consider what announcement of the previous night's revelations they would make in the house, and here they differed very much in opinion. Harry was for proclaiming every particular boldly and at once,

letting Mrs. Headley bear as best she could the consequent opprobrium which would be heaped on her. Frank, still sensitive as to his past connection with them, and shrinking from having Agnes' name bandied to and fro among comparative strangers, strongly advocated greater reticence; and so, after much discussion, it was decided only to make known to Mrs. Bradford enough of the story to set all superstitious fears at rest, and to reveal Mrs. Headley's iniquitous attempt to excite them to such a serious pitch by her unworthy practices.

A gay party had gone off quite early in the day for a drive: not, with decorous circumspection, keeping all together; but in light carriages, where each gentleman had only one lady-companion, who thus became his especial charge. They had driven far into the mountains this time, following the cool, shady by-lanes and country roads, until they reached a primitive little hamlet, where they rested their horses, and managed to procure a tolerably comfortable luncheon at a very rustic country inn. Returning late in the afternoon, with much frolicsome mirth and boisterous flow of spirits, they were only beginning to arrive at very irregular intervals when the dinner-bell sounded at Arlington House.

There were still many vacancies at the table when Mrs. Ashton entered and took her seat, accompanied by her husband and Hilton.

The latter, looking impatiently at Rose's vacant place by his side, was little inclined for conversation, and therefore felt relieved, though surprised, that neither Mrs. Wayland nor Fred Maynard had come in.

Not very much later, however, they entered together, laughing heartily over some joke, as they took their seats.

"O, Mr. Hilton!" cried the widow coquettishly, looking very pretty with her sparkling animation, her softly flushed cheeks, and bright eyes, "we have had such a charming drive! Don't you wish you had been with us?"

"No doubt I should have been more gayly occupied than in my comparative solitude here," he answered, smiling pleasantly at her, "but you did not ask me."

"I meant to, but we could not find you. Where had you hidden yourself?"

"I fancy I was writing letters at the precise moment of your search. I heard afterwards I had been in demand, but did not know what I had lost. Have all come back as bright as yourself?"

"That I cannot answer for. In fact, not more

than half of us have returned yet. We got separated somehow."

"To your great regret, no doubt."

"O, no! I do not make any false pretenses. Our party was too admirably arranged for any such regrets to be possible."

"Maynard seems to have returned to his allegiance," observed Harry a little maliciously. "At one time it looked as if pretty Kate Headley had absorbed his capricious fancy."

"Nonsense!" cried Mrs. Wayland, with a flush of annoyance deepening on her fair cheek; "if he had ever given her a serious thought, he would be well punished in her cool desertion of him for Alfred Cameron."

"Cameron!" repeated Harry with sudden gravity; "was he of your party?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Wayland composedly. "Who else would have been acceptable as Kate Headley's cavalier?"

"Is it possible that foolish child has gone alone with him?" asked Harry indignantly, glancing as he spoke so reprovingly at Fred Maynard as to call an accusing flush to his cheek, as he said hastily,

"Well, it is not my doing. Mrs. Headley herself sent Cameron a note, asking him to drive with

her daughter ; and he is too much a man of gallantry to refuse."

"Gallantry !" muttered Harry wrathfully ; "if I were not especially averse to meddling with that family's affairs I would warn Captain Headley—"

"It would be no use, my dear fellow," soothingly replied Fred Maynard. "Mrs. Headley is chief officer there, and she generally knows what she is about, I fancy."

"Not very much harm can be done, Harry," interposed Mrs. Ashton with her usual placid composure. "One drive cannot very greatly contaminate the girl, and as they go away to-morrow this will be the end of it."

"That is true," he answered meditatively ; "still it is all wrong."

At this moment a servant bent over Mrs. Wayland with a message whose tenor for one instant drove all the color from her cheek, bringing it back in a tumultuous flood of dismay and confusion, as she replied, in tones that were full of apprehension,

"Miss Headley ? Has she not returned ? Tell Mrs. Headley she will of course be here very soon. Have all the others come ?"

"All except her," replied the man.

"Well," with vexed impatience, "the delay is

not my fault. She cannot be long coming now."

As the man, with the indifferent stolidity of his class, walked slowly back to where Mrs. Headley could be seen, even at that distance, watching him with irrepressible anxiety and alarm, Frank and Harry exchanged glances of grave concern, while Fred Maynard exclaimed with irritation,

"How absurd it is for that woman to make all this fuss now, when she has seemed all along so careless of the girl's doings!"

"Her carelessness was reprehensible enough," said Harry severely; "but if she knows what a scamp your friend Cameron is, even Mrs. Headley may well be alarmed now."

"Well, it is not my affair. I don't see that he is much worse than other men, after all; and Mrs. Headley has only herself to thank for choosing him. If he had come here voluntarily after the girl, I would myself have interfered; but invited and persuaded by the mother, who can blame him for accepting the offer?"

"I don't see why all this excitement is made," observed Mrs. Wayland pettishly. "The girl is pretty capable of taking care of herself, and their merely prolonging their ride is no very serious affair."

"Not if that is all," replied Harry; "but it passes my comprehension how any mother, even one like Mrs. Headley, could permit so young a girl to go out alone with such a stranger, one whom she had only met twice before, even had his character been irreproachable."

"O, you married men become very particular!" cried the little widow with pretended vivacity. "In your bachelor days were you so scrupulous about driving out with pretty girls?"

"In those days," he answered, almost angrily, "we did not care to take the pretty girls who were so willing and eager to go with us. We prized most the favor accorded so rarely and with such difficulty that we could hope it was not shared with others."

The discussion was taking so unpleasant a tone that all were relieved as a general move betokened the ending of the unusually quiet dinner-hour. A few of the late-comers still lingered, amongst whom sat Mrs. Headley, impatiently watching the door, in hope even yet of her daughter's return.

As the Ashtons, accompanied by Frank Hilton, went directly to their own rooms, they by one consent avoided all reference to this perplexing question, which nevertheless gravely occupied their thoughts; and it was with a feeling of corre-

sponding relief and pleasure that they found Rose sitting by the open window, enjoying the cool freshness of the evening air, as she watched contentedly for their coming.

Even Harry and Clare, almost unconsciously disturbed by Rose's unwonted indisposition, hung over her for a moment, showing their gladness by many little caresses and tender words. Frank, silenced and overpowered for the moment by the sweet joy of seeing her so unexpectedly, could only come eagerly to her side, taking her little hand in his strong, earnest clasp, and daring to hold it for one instant, with a faint, trembling pressure which brought a little flush of color to her pale cheek, and caused her eyes to droop shyly as, after an instant of bewitching hesitation, she gently withdrew it.

As he vainly sought for words which would not too daringly reveal the tumult of joyous excitement that had taken possession of him, Mrs. Ashton came unknowingly to the rescue by asking,

"Have you seen my last piece of work, Mr. Hilton? With the aid of Rose's pencil, I think I am making quite a success this time."

As he crossed the room and duly admired the embroidery—of which it is safe to say he had not the faintest perception, either as to its form or

color—Frank managed to steady his nerves and subdue his throbbing pulses, so that he could presently enter tranquilly upon the desultory conversation that followed, in which Rose took very little part.

She was still languid, and quickly wearied; so that at a very early hour she bid them all good-night, and returned to her room, confident of a long, restful repose, with no longer the thought of possible disturbance to weigh upon her spirits.

Frank still loitered, much as he also needed sleep after the previous night's adventures, and remained chatting idly to Mrs. Ashton, while Harry had gone to look for an evening paper.

As he returned after a short absence, his serious look only too surely indicated some disturbing news.

"What is it, Harry?" impulsively uttered by both, brought the dread answer,

"Miss Headley has not returned, and the mother is wild with alarm."

"Have they sent over to Cameron's?" asked Frank.

"He has not been seen or heard of since morning," replied Harry, almost reluctantly.

"What has been done?" returned Frank, advancing towards the door.

"Nothing more, as yet ; but of course a search must be made."

"I will go at once. Will you come?"

"If Clare will not mind—" looking at her hesitatingly.

"No ; I ought not to keep you. You will not stay late."

"Not longer than may be necessary."

One word of farewell, of caution not to have Rose awakened, and they were off for a long, dreary night-ride—who could guess whither?

Hours after, weary, gloomy, and discouraged, they returned with the others who had joined in the quest. No news of the fugitives had been gained ; not the faintest idea could be found of their whereabouts ; and all sought their rooms at last, thinking sadly of the mother's terrible punishment, the pretty, foolish girl's madness, and feeling most of all their utter inability to give aid or comfort.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FORTUNATELY for Frank's chance of obtaining that night the rest of which he stood so greatly in need, he was too utterly weary to lose a moment in seeking his pillow. Thus he failed to see on his dressing-table a letter which had been placed there, since he had arranged his dress for dinner, and which now rested there still, through all the dark silent hours which preceded the dawn of another day upon the unconscious world. Well was it for him that he could sleep calmly, forgetting even the last painful event of the day, which had ended in such hopeless gloom, as he dreamed only of the fair, sweet girl he was learning to love so intensely.

Full of joyous thoughts of her, and bright visions of what the future might have in store for him, he had cheerily made his morning toilet, and was whistling softly to himself the air of one of Rose's songs, when at last he perceived the letter, so long lying neglected before him.

With a faint presentiment of evil, a bitter foreshadowing of pain, he took it warily in his fingers,

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almost dreading its very touch. The handwriting seemed strange to him at first, and yet vaguely suggested some unwelcome association, to dispel which he at length, with a bitter laugh at his folly, impetuously tore open the letter.

One glance revealing Mrs. Headley's signature, caused him to indignantly throw it aside, as unworthy even perusal. Then softened by a remembrance of her recent grief, not feeling sure the letter might not have been written in penitence after that terrible blow had fallen, and while he was out with the others, vainly seeking the missing girl, Frank again took up the letter, and somewhat sternly addressed himself to the task of reading it, secretly nerving himself for whatever of pain or sadness it might occasion.

"Mr. Hilton," it began, "will regard with wonder and suspicion any communication from one whom he has allowed himself to distrust and dislike. Yet it is with a sincere desire to spare him one added sting of fresh repentance that the sad past is once more revived. However mistaken, then, may have been the zeal to secure an unfortunate girl's happiness, which sought to place its care in hands so worthy and with honor so untarnished, it is the knowledge of that very honor with its irreproachable integrity which seems now

to demand a revelation that otherwise would have been withheld forever. However faintly poor Agnes' love may have been returned, the bond which once existed can never be ignored by one so high-minded. It needs but the statement that Agnes still lives—"

The fatal letter dropped from his nerveless hand and he concealed his face on his folded arms, with a groan of intense anguish. Agnes lives! and Rose—sweet, dearly loved Rose! How could he bear this frightful blow?—how ever again look upon life and the world, where all but a moment since seemed so joyous and smiling?

In intense suffering, he remained for a long time motionless and silent, vainly struggling for strength and nerve to meet bravely this staggering blow. At length, with a face so livid and distorted it scarcely seemed the same whose manly beauty but a brief space since smiled back upon him from the mirror, he raised his head, and with feeble but resolute grasp took up the senseless paper which had been fraught with such grief to see what further cruelty it could convey.

"Agnes still lives!" he muttered, finding at last the fatal words, and reading with dazed, bewildered brain the few closing phrases: "Agnes still lives, and awaits in her far-off, solitary home the

possible joyful fate which in all these years she has never ceased to hope for, in the return of her wandering but still dearly loved betrothed."

Again the letter fluttered to the floor at his feet, and with less bewildered excitement he sought calmly to consider what this revelation meant to him. Its truth he could not question. Not even Mrs. Headley, with all her bold, unscrupulous scheming, would dare make such an assertion if it were unfounded. Neither could she have any motive for inflicting such gratuitous pain. Even in the midst of his suffering he could pause now, and feel sincere, unselfish pleasure in Agnes' existence, however fraught with disaster to him that life might prove. It was something to have the long burden of self-reproach removed at length, which her seeming death had imposed ; something to feel no longer that a young life had been sacrificed, as it were, in his name, though unwittingly. Then, accepting the situation, with this one gleam of brightness to soften its bitterness, he addressed himself with grave sternness to consider how far honor still bound him to the girl whose very existence had been so strangely kept from his knowledge all these years. Why had not the claim been made sooner, if it had not been definitely abandoned ? Puzzled by all these thoughts, yet finding

almost unconsciously a suggestion of hope in the very mystery which had so surrounded Agnes' existence, and wondering how he could compel from Mrs. Headley a trustworthy statement of the details of which he could not yet form the least idea, he became insensibly soothed and quieted, ready to face with a calmer courage whatever of cruelty fate had reserved for him.

He could presently join the others at the breakfast-table, with so composed a bearing that no suspicion occurred to any one of the advent of a new grief in his stormy, tempest-tossed life. His added paleness and gravity were readily attributed to the fatigue and horror of his unavailing search for the hapless girl, at so late an hour in the night; and even Harry never dreamed of any new trial when his friend abruptly carried him off as they left the dining-room, with a few strong words of urgency that he would come with him at once to his room.

With quick, hasty strides, yet still in utter silence, Frank hurried his friend up-stairs and through the corridor, not even speaking; when on reaching his room and closing the door he placed in his hands the letter, whose perusal seemed to have crushed out all the hope and glory of his life.

"What is it, Frank?" asked Harry in extreme surprise, still holding the letter unopened in his hand, as he looked anxiously at him. "Have you news of that poor child?"

"Read it!" answered Frank hoarsely and in great agitation. "God forgive me! but my own grief has almost made me forget that foolish girl's fatal frolic."

Almost while he spoke Harry had hastily gathered the contents of the letter, so brief, yet of such vast and bitter import. Then, controlling his first intended expression of amazement and regret, he paused, before gravely saying,

"At least be thankful, Frank, that the ill-fated Agnes still lives, however it may seem to complicate affairs for you."

"I am! I am!" he replied, with a groan he could not repress; "but is it only a seeming complication? Am I not bound hand and foot, helplessly, forever?"

"I am not sure," said Ashton meditatively, carefully measuring his words, and speaking composedly, that he might thus aid his friend to regain his own self-control. "This matter requires careful investigation. You do not doubt the truth of the story, I suppose?"

"Were there any object in falsehood, I might;

but what advantage could she derive from it if not true?"

"None, apparently; still—"

"For Heaven's sake, Harry, what is this doubt of yours?"

"It is hardly a doubt; only, this subtle schemer might think it worth while even to make an assertion you could not easily disprove, no matter how false it really is."

"You mean for the sake of keeping me in fetters still."

"I do! I saw her once look at Rose with a malignity actually diabolical; and it would be like her to leave this barbed sting behind, in making the compulsory departure we have required of her."

"Still I can find means to enforce a more definite revelation. If Agnes claims my promise—" he stopped short, in bitter pain, at thought of the cruel renunciation this would demand.

"Take courage, Frank," interposed his friend soothingly. "If Agnes meant to hold you to your promise, she would not all these years have so carefully kept from you the secret of her existence. Whatever may have been the mystery which has thus far enshrouded it, be sure it is not revealed now for her good or yours. Mrs. Headley has some

vile purpose to serve, which it may not be incumbent on you to further."

"What puzzles me most is the silence of all these years."

"That is the great difficulty in my way too. I cannot reconcile with the idea you have given me of Agnes' gentle, yielding nature, her claiming you after all this time, as long as she did not do so then?"

"She was always passive in Mrs. Headley's hands, ready to believe to-day what to-morrow she would equally, at her instigation, reject."

"I will not say, Frank, that you owe her nothing," began Harry cautiously.

"I owe her whatever she requires," he answered gloomily.

"True; but only of her own will. If, as seems most likely, she has become indifferent—"

"Even then she has my word, And, Harry, remember how I love Rose!" growing white to his very lips, as he forced himself to utter that dear name.

"I do not forget it, dear fellow," he replied, deeply affected by Frank's evident despair, "and you may trust me to find some way of saving you yet."

"God grant it!" he cried fervently. "It would

be bitter enough to give up Rose ; but beyond all other cruelty would be the fate which would force me to marry another—even poor Agnes !”

“Poor Agnes, indeed ! What a life hers must have been !”

“After all, where can she be ? If they left her abroad, what can have been the motive ?”

“Possibly, as you spoke of their limited means, something may have offered in the way of taking her off their hands. A position as companion or governess—”

Frank started up, and walked for some moments impatiently up and down the room. Then returning to his place, he said, in still evident irritation,

“I cannot bear such a thought about that poor girl. That she should need to so employ herself, while I was wandering about the world, spending so freely !”

“It may not have been so, Frank. Have patience, dear fellow, and leave this in my hands. I will see Captain Headley, and require more explicit information about this strange story.”

“He will only tell you what his wife orders or permits him to say.”

“Very good. If it is not satisfactory, I will go to her and wring the truth from her.”

“If you only could ! It is curious, Harry, quiet

and indolent as you usually are, how much real energy lies dormant in your composition."

"I never did believe," said Ashton, laughing slightly, "in making great excitements over small things ; but when there is anything to be done, why, of course, the shortest way is the best."

"And you mean to do this at once?"

"Without an hour's delay. They were to leave to-day, you know ; but now, since the girl's disappearance, they may ask a few days' grace, to give them time to search more effectually, which it would be brutal to refuse ; and so we will have more chance of gaining information for ourselves."

"You are always good and thoughtful ; but what am I to do ? I dare not be with Rose—"

"Nonsense ; the best thing you can do is to take her off for a walk and be out of my way. I really wish it."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE Headley party had come so late to the breakfast-table that morning, after being occupied in the fruitless search for the fugitives to nearly daylight, that most of the guests of the house had already left it.

The gentlemen generally had taken the morning train for the city, and some of the ladies had returned to their own rooms ; but quite a number remained in the parlors discussing the recent event with more or less languid excitement, as they idly assumed to be occupied with their work.

The prevailing feeling among them was far more of indignation at the mother, whose culpable carelessness actually connived at her daughter's folly, than unmixed reprehension of the latter's disregard of all social restraints.

"I do not entirely exonerate the girl, however," observed Mrs. Bradford thoughtfully. "She ought to have had enough natural delicacy to have been guarded against such bold actions, no matter how much the mother encouraged them."

"But, after all, where are you to draw the line?" asked Mrs. Wayland, with some covert irritation. "It seems to me conduct is only relatively innocent; that it depends most upon each individual's own nature and motives how we are to judge their acts."

"It is safest," replied Mrs. Bradford dryly, "to refrain from deeds which could ever lead to evil in others, even if we are sure of our own rectitude."

"What fun would there be left in the world if such a rigid rule were adopted?"

"The pursuit of fun is not exactly all we have to live for," interposed Mrs. Oldham kindly yet authoritatively. "You must forgive me for reminding you that all this evil might not have occurred had not the downward path been so convenient, so invitingly opened before them, by that very pursuit."

"You certainly cannot say that because the rest of us got up this party we are responsible for the misconduct of those who took advantage of it!" and the little widow's face flushed and darkened with anger as she spoke.

"No: that would be an extreme view; but the restraints which were too slight for them are hazardous always."

"My mother means—" gently began Mrs. Brad-

ford, pitying the confusion and annoyance Mrs. Wayland could not conceal.

"Only to suggest the excuse Mrs. Headley will make for her daughter," interrupted Mrs. Oldham.

"It will not do for her to attempt any excuse," impatiently replied Mrs. Wayland. "Not one of us would have gone with Alfred Cameron anywhere, and if she did not know his character she could easily have ascertained it."

"I thought she did make some inquiries of Mr. Maynard," said Mrs. Bradford with some surprise; "at least I heard her say so."

"None that would have enlightened her on that head," replied that gentleman, coming forward as he heard his name mentioned, but looking a little uneasy as he spoke. "She only catechized me as to his social position and means, which of course I answered favorably. I could not volunteer what she did not want to know."

"Still, your silence may have worked a terrible wrong, however undesigned," said Mrs. Oldham severely. "If you knew, then, of this proposed party, your failure to speak—"

"But I did not," he replied, with a deep flush of pain, as he felt how bitter was this not entirely unmerited rebuke. "It was after our boating ex-

pedition the other day ; and I could not have guessed all this would follow."

"Well, really !" said Mrs. Wayland pettishly. "It seems to me the mother was so ready to throw the girl at any one's head she could encounter, no warning or caution from any of us would have had any effect."

"Perhaps not," replied Mrs. Bradford. "But still—"

At this moment Mrs. Headley came impetuously forward, having entered the room unobserved, as Mrs. Wayland was speaking ; and she stood before the startled group with such angrily flashing eyes, such an air of concentrated rage, that all looked upon her too intensely surprised to immediately comprehend her purpose."

"Is it possible," she exclaimed after a pause, in which she seemed to gasp for breath, "that at such a moment as this you can dare so coolly to criticise my child and myself ? Do you think I do not understand the petty jealousy which prompts you ?"

"Jealousy, Mrs. Headley ?" at length gently asked Mrs. Bradford, too full of womanly pity to resent this unwarrantable language from the woman she believed to be half-crazed with grief. "You very much misunderstand us all if you think—"

"I know," she rudely interrupted, "that from the day we entered this house my daughter has been carped at and pulled to pieces by those who coveted for themselves the admiration she has excited, and I want it to be distinctly understood that such comments must cease at once."

As the others looked at each other in genuine perplexity, wondering how they were to take this singular address, Mrs. Wayland asked bitterly,—too provoked now to care for the pain she might inflict,—

"Is it possible, Mrs. Headley, you suspect us of envying your daughter *now*?"

"And why not? Has she not won, almost at a glance, attention you would willingly have kept for yourself?"

"Do you mean Alfred Cameron's?" asked Mrs. Wayland, now furiously angry.

"Not only his, but Mr. Maynard's," ruthlessly replied Mrs. Headley. You know how from the first—"

"Stay, Mrs. Headley," said Fred Maynard, coming forward from the window, where he had been talking apart with Mrs. Bradford. "Any passing attention I may have shown your daughter was no more than any pretty girl would have received at my hands. "Don't imagine I was seriously—"

"Of course you will say so now," she interrupted, with a sardonic laugh. "You will tell me, perhaps, you do not regret introducing your friend."

"I do regret that sincerely!" he cried eagerly, "and also that I ever called him friend, who—"

"Who did not respect the sacred rights of friendship," she added contemptuously. "You should remember, 'all is fair in love.'"

"But, surely—" he began, confounded beyond concealment at her extraordinary tone.

"O, I do not mean to quarrel with you," she interposed, more quietly. "You will get over your little disappointment, easily enough; and, as we go away this afternoon, you will soon forget it and its cause together. If you ever meet again, Mrs. Cameron—"

All exchanged startled, pitying glances, but dared not speak; while Fred Maynard, in honest horror now at the whole affair, muttered helplessly,

"By Jove! this is beyond belief," as he incontinently took flight, unable to encounter the scene he felt must follow.

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Headley serenely, as she watched his hasty retreat with complacent satisfaction at the thought of the havoc her Kate had wrought in that too susceptible heart.

But Mrs. Wayland was too bitterly angry to leave her foe in this state of self-gratulation; and while most of the others were withdrawing, in deep pity for the mother's ill-founded hopes, the daughter's wretched, misguided folly, she alone dared to attack both, as she said in accents of sharpest irritation,

"You need not pity Mr. Maynard, Mrs. Headley. His passing flirtation with your daughter did neither of them any harm. But her unfortunate meeting with Mr. Cameron—"

"O, that will come all right," tranquilly replied the mother, with an air of indulgent superiority.

"You expect he will marry her, then?" asked Mrs. Wayland, with almost brutal abruptness.

Mrs. Headley started one step forward, in a new passion of rage.

"Marry her!" she cried angrily. "How dare you ask such a question? Do you suppose my Kate would so forget herself, or my husband fail to enforce it?"

"You might have learned if you had chosen to ask," replied the widow, with surprising intrepidity, "that Alfred Cameron, had he contemplated marriage—"

"I will not listen to another word!" hotly answered Mrs. Headley. "My husband is now on

their track, and this day's sun will not set on Alfred Cameron's living self if he has not married my Kate !"

And in a perfect whirlwind of passionate rage she stalked angrily out of the room.

"How could you be so cruel, Mrs. Wayland?" asked Mrs. Oldham reproachfully, after a moment's pause of horrified silence on the part of all.

"How can she be such a fool!" impetuously demanded the widow, her fair face all flushed as she spoke.

"Her folly is very great, truly. But think how she would suffer if she were not so credulous, so confident of all ending as she wishes."

"They may even compel Cameron to marry the girl; but imagine a mother being satisfied with a result so secured!"

"She seems cool and unscrupulous enough for anything. Even of her own showing, she would have forced the elder girl on Frank Hilton but for her strange death."

"You clear him of blame, then?"

"I know too much of both parties to do otherwise."

"Well, I begin to think so myself now. I really felt very sorry for Mrs. Headley about her runaway daughter—"

"But her attack on Mr. Maynard changes all that?" interposed Mrs. Bradford, with an amused laugh.

"Well, you see, he and I have been such good friends always; and he never thought twice of that foolish girl."

"Probably not; but, after all, he would be wiser to use more discretion in his flirting if he must indulge in it."

"Nonsense! His flirting will never do any harm."

"I am not sure of that. At least, however this affair ends, I think he will never again be so careless about introducing people who had best remain unacquainted."

"Well, Alfred Cameron is rather objectionable," admitted the fair widow, with a cool frankness Mrs. Bradford could not help laughing at, though she immediately added gravely,

"He is not fit for any pure, right-minded woman to know. Old, married woman as I am, I would not permit him to be presented to me."

"I am sure that is being too particular," protested Mrs. Wayland. "What pleasure can we enjoy if we must always be investigating every one we meet before admitting them to our circle?"

"Barriers are often inconvenient," replied Mrs.

Bradford, smiling, but still seriously, "yet they are too useful to dispense with entirely."

"A charming and appropriate sentiment!" observed Harry Ashton, as he approached them at this moment. "May I ask how you acquired so much wisdom?"

"We were speaking of that poor Kate Headley—" began Mrs. Bradford.

"I do not wonder, then, at your words," he replied, with a stern look. "Had that unfortunate girl known even the usual social restraints—had her mother possessed the merest common-sense and discretion—she would not have so readily fallen into such hands as Cameron's."

"There is no further news, I suppose?"

"None, as yet. I was looking for Captain Headley, wishing to speak to him of another matter; and they tell me he has gone again on the search. Have you seen Mrs. Headley at all? She did not come to breakfast, so I suppose she does not leave her room."

"O yes, she does! She was here a few moments since, taking us all severely to task for commenting on this sad affair."

"Indeed?" elevating his brows and shrugging his shoulders with a curious mixture of amusement and disapproval. "Then I should not in-

trude on her grief unkindly, by asking to see her?"

"You will probably find her in a peaceful temper," observed Mrs. Wayland ironically.

"O, I can stand that! Did she go to her room again?"

"I think not. There she is now,"—pointing to some one pacing to and fro in the shaded avenue close by.

"I will join her there," said he, rising hastily and stepping through one of the French windows upon the piazza, so as not to lose sight of her.

As Mrs. Headley saw Harry Ashton approach, a sudden thrill of uneasy apprehension seemed to warn her vaguely of his purpose, and she visibly shrank back, looking eagerly on all sides, as though she would gladly have escaped. Recognizing that attempt to be impossible, however, she summoned all her forces to meet with calm courage whatever adverse fate he brought with him; and he could not restrain a reluctant admiration for the cool composure with which she received him.

"I learn your husband is still absent on this sad quest," he said courteously, "and am thus compelled to disturb you with some questions I hoped he would answer."

Her lips paled a little, and trembled as she replied huskily,

"I am, of course, too dreadfully overcome by this unfortunate event to bear very much more ; still, whatever I can do to show my sense of your kindness—"

She paused, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, as though unable to speak another word.

With some hesitation and embarrassment, Harry proceeded, less assuredly,

"But for the seriousness of my business I would not intrude on you now, Mrs. Headley. I need but say Frank Hilton has shown me your letter."

"Has shown it to *you* ? Oh, how cruel ! How will Agnes ever forgive such a heartless betrayal of her secret ?"

"It is hers, then ; not yours ?"

"Hers only. The poor child was so broken-hearted over Frank's desertion of her—"

"Stop, Mrs. Headley ! It will save words if I tell you I know the whole truth—"

"What have you then to ask me ?" with a sullen expression, which boded no good result to his mission.

"Only, where Agnes is now ?" he answered, somewhat sternly, as he recognized the difficulties before him.

"That I dare not tell you."

"To what purpose, then, have you revealed her existence to Hilton, and claimed the fulfillment of his engagement?"

"Does he, then, intend to fulfill it?" with suspicious eagerness of tone and look.

"If required by her, yes."

She looked long and earnestly in his face, as if puzzled and disturbed by so easy a victory when she had anticipated so much resistance. Then, suspecting some snare, totally incapable of comprehending the simple, straightforward conduct of a man of honor, she said cautiously,

"I will tell my poor girl only too gladly. How she will rejoice at such an ending of her long trial!"

"Hilton chooses to tell her himself," replied Harry coldly. "I am here to demand in his name her present address."

"Why does he not ask it personally? Where is he that he needs send an ambassador?" she asked, with sudden sharpness.

"Just now he is taking a walk with my sister," he replied tranquilly, yet fixing upon her a steady gaze, under which she quailed, even while permitting a flash of malignant anger to escape from her half-averted eyes. With all her self-control, she

could not restrain the bitter words, which fell, almost against her will, from her lips,

"Your sister is kind to accept the service which belongs in honor to another."

"My sister, if you please," with indignant emphasis, "is not at present under discussion. I am waiting for your answer."

"I have none for you. Only when Frank Hilton comes to me, claiming his wife, shall he know where to find her."

"Very good,"—making a movement to retire. "By the bye," as by a sudden second thought, "it is curious you should in your vile masquerading the other night, have endeavored to impress Hilton with the idea of a spiritual visitation from one whom you now claim to be still of material flesh and blood."

His steady gaze, while he spoke, brought a sudden look of confusion, a quick, nervous clasping together of the hands, a weak fluttering of the eyelids, that fell droopingly over the eyes which sought to meet his unflinchingly—all of which he closely observed, quickly as they were controlled, as she replied, with coolness that matched his own,

"If you choose to busy yourself with my family affairs, you must not be offended if I decline to submit to such prying."

"I shall, nevertheless, draw my own inferences from your silence even,"—turning half-away from her.

"And what are they?" she asked hastily, yet at once repenting the imprudence of her question.

"Only—that Agnes is—not living," he answered, with calm assurance.

A deep flush rose to her very brow, as she stood for one instant silent and downcast before him; shame and self-conviction seeming to be written on every feature. Then, with a strong effort, she drew herself up with a certain dignity of mien, looking in haughty composure full in his face, as she said slowly,

"That your insults pain me, you see too clearly; but at least, being only a woman, I may claim to be protected by my sex and the sacredness of a mother's grief, from any further unmanly attack."

She made a movement to pass him as she spoke, looking so grieved and indignant he almost felt staggered by her wonderful assurance, and tempted to ask the forgiveness she would be justified in refusing were he really in the wrong.

The remembrance of all her past misdeeds, however, and of Frank's despairing face as he revealed all the cruelty she had inflicted on him, steeled his

heart against her skilled reproaches; and as he left her he only said, seriously,

“ If you can ever show me that I have misjudged and wronged you, I will only too gladly seek to make amends for it.”

CHAPTER XX.

FRANK, at once seeking Rose, found her full of grief and distress over the sad folly of pretty Kate Headley, whose story Mrs. Ashton had just related to her.

It was singular that in Mrs. Ashton's peculiar form of nervous disease all these shocks of painful excitement, so far from doing her any harm, actually exerted a beneficial effect. Her extreme sensitiveness to all external influences—which would cause her to shrink in real terror from the lightest touch, the merest superficial contact—became momentarily soothed and blunted if only her attention could be absorbed in any emotion or sensation which would carry her, as it were, out of her own consciousness. Thus in all the new and varied tumult of thought and perception, resulting both from Frank's deliberate efforts to produce this desired diversion and from the curious and startling events which these last few days had contained, Mrs. Ashton found such absolute benefit, that a superficial observer would have condemned her as

heartless—as living only in the woes and sufferings of others. Yet this would have been a harsh, unmerited judgment. It was only the Providential blessing, that so often evolves good from evil, in superiority to man's weak, less pure designs; or as though by a caprice of nature she could derive benefit through the enduring by others of the surgical knife, or their acceptance in her behalf of distasteful but salutary doses.

But very different upon Rose's fragile physique and more spiritual nature was the influence of these last painful occurrences. Again her eyes were darkly ringed and shadowed, her delicate features wan and colorless, and her whole bearing suggestive of a languor which fatally threatened the young life of which she seemed to have so frail a tenure. There had been days when, relieved from the pressure of care for Mrs. Ashton and sympathetic pain for her brother, in beholding that dear one's manifest improvement Rose had visibly revived under Frank's skilled ministering, and responded with encouraging animation and joyousness to his earnest efforts for her good. But now the shock her nerves had sustained in hearing that wild, wailing cry in the dark hours, when supernatural horror holds such easy sway, adding to the weariness of her long vigil the pain of learn-

ing how false and cruel was the nature which could attempt such a deception, had undone much of the good result of Frank's care. Thus this new tale of misery in which Mrs. Ashton took animated interest so crushed and depressed Rose, that Frank, with almost scant ceremony, insisted peremptorily on her going out with him at once, so much he dreaded her continuing to hear the sad theme perseveringly commented on.

"Harry told me to take you with me," he added, as she still hesitated.

With a wintry sort of smile she rose languidly, saying,

"Well, if you really care to have such a stupid companion as I cannot help being to-day—"

"I hope you will have consideration enough not to be stupid, when I am dependent on you for amusement."

"I fancied you meant to amuse me,"—a little more brightly.

"Not at all! I shall not even take a book this time, but depend entirely on you and your embroidery."

With some further weak protestations, Rose yielded to his persuasions, and let him lead her quietly to a cool, secluded spot, where they could rest without fear of interruption.

His chivalrous soul could forget all the pain which had so cruelly come into his own life, forever wrecking his peace and shattering his hopes, while he devoted every thought and energy to give the fair girl he loved one hour of the peace and rest he must so soon leave her to pine for, or win from other hands than his.

Finding very soon that his pretended interest in her work could not rouse Rose into any sustained effort, Frank gently took it from her hands, at length, and laid it aside, while he meditated for an instant how he could turn her thoughts into channels more animating, even if still on the sad subjects over which she persistently brooded.

With the daring of sudden inspiration, he said at last, with earnestness,

“Rose, have you forgotten the story of Agnes Headley?”

With a little shy flush at his calling her “Rose,” yet not seeking to forbid it, she answered timidly,

“How could I? I have scarcely known whether most to pity you or her.”

“We have both been ill-fated, it is true. I thought for years the cruelest part of my destiny was the knowledge that it needed the sacrifice of her life to free me from an unwelcome bond; and yet—

"Surely you must always feel that; not in self-reproach, but still as an unavoidable misfortune."

"Would you have preferred, in my place, that she had lived and I had married her?"

"I cannot tell;" and a new embarrassment crept into Rose's sweet face, on which he was gazing with such inexpressible longing, as she added softly, "I think even such a death would be better than a loveless, fettered life."

"Yet the burden, all these years, of believing she so died has been very hard to bear."

"You should not feel so. Had I been Agnes, with her weak submission to the will that left only that alternative, I should have preferred such a death to the life so marred."

"With your strong, earnest nature you cannot understand Agnes' feeble negative sweetness."

"Perhaps not; but"—with sudden thoughtfulness—"why did you speak just now of once 'believing she so died,' as if you now doubted it?"

"Because," with sudden desperation of purpose, as he nerved himself to make the whole bitter revelation, "I have lately been led to think she did not so die."

"How, then—" began Rose, with quick sympathy for his pained tones.

"I mean," very gloomily, yet resolutely, "that she still lives."

"Good Heavens!" growing very pale, as she almost unconsciously took his clinched hand in hers, and let her fingers close warmly over it, with a touch of infinite consolation, while she added softly, "It must be a comfort to you to know this; and yet how cruelly it places you!"

"More than you dream of, Rose!" he cried passionately. "Tell me,—you are so pure and true in all your impulses,—what must I do?"

"Whatever you ought," she answered gently, still too dazed and bewildered to see clearly all he meant. "Do you suppose she would still expect or wish—" she stopped, in a sudden confusion, yet not knowing why his ardent gaze so abashed her.


"I am told she does," he uttered, speaking with a violent effort what seemed to be his death-warrant.

"But how have you heard all this?" asked Rose, beginning at last to gain some idea of how strange was this revelation.

"Mrs. Headley told me, as a warning, she said," he answered, with gloomy bitterness.

"And you can believe her?"

"Only because she could have no motive for falsehood."



"But how does she explain this long deception?"

"As Agnes' wish—not desiring to compel me to an unwilling marriage."

"Had you then told her of a change in your—"

"In my wishes?" he interrupted. "No: they have not changed as regards poor Agnes; but she feared I might be tempted—"

He paused, as a deep flush spread itself over Rose's face, and he saw she guessed the temptation Mrs. Headley feared.

Bravely, however, Rose spoke in answer to his broken sentence.

"She knew well enough that no temptation could keep you from doing your duty."

"And that duty is—Rose, I will take my fate only from your lips. Must I submit to this demand?"

He looked so entreatingly, with such mad longing, into her earnest, truthful eyes, whose gaze rested just one moment so trustingly on his, that she could no longer be blind to his meaning. That he loved her,—even in this terrible moment of renunciation,—came upon her consciousness as a sweet flood of bewildering joy; and she remained utterly speechless as she realized the torturing rapture of knowing herself so beloved, when she must so relentlessly put the intoxicating cup from her

lips, without once tasting the draught of fatal sweetness it contained.

And he, looking upon her agitated features, gazing into the loving depths of those frank eyes, knew, with the intolerable anguish of denied joy, that she too in her secret soul shared his passionate love. Yet not one word must he dare to utter to make their parting more cruel. Looking down into the very depths of her heart, he must be content with this one glimpse of the possible joy he must leave and never again dare to contemplate.

After a pause of many moments, in which neither dared attempt the speech they feared would betray their strong emotion, Frank bent reverently over the little fingers, which still rested in his, and forced himself to only lightly touch them with his lips as he released them, though in his heart he was wild to press countless kisses upon them as they lay so trustingly in his grasp. Then, as she looked gravely at him, with pure, confident gaze, seeming to comprehend his inmost thought and purpose, he repeated calmly, as with complete resignation to the fate he would not unworthily evade,

“Tell me, Rose—must I submit to this?”

“Could you do less, in honor?” she asked softly, yet almost inaudibly. “If Agnes claims your promise—”

She stopped, with sudden trembling and paleness, as she felt how remorseless was the fate which compelled her to speak such words to his submissive ears, and saw how white to the very lips was the face before her as he bowed silently to her decree.

"Rose, Rose," he murmured, very low, as she turned away from the sight which so shook her resolution, brave as she had been in speaking. His simple, anguished utterance of her name, however, while it thrilled her very soul with unutterable pain, revived her faltering courage, and she again let the truthful inspiration of her gaze rest on him, as she said, frankly but tenderly,

"Is it not a comfort that sorrows are always fleeting, so long as we obey the call of duty?"

"True!" he cried, with a sudden exultation of rapture, as he watched her ardent, glowing features; "and joys, even if denied in this world, can be eternal as the heavens while the soul's purity is maintained!"

"Some day, in the far-off future—" she began, with all his enthusiasm reflected in her earnest gaze; but paused abruptly, while the light faded rapidly in her eyes, and her lips quivered so that no further utterance was possible.

Could she guess how it needed all the force of

his strong will to restrain him from catching her in his arms, and soothing all the bitterness of her grief with tenderest kisses and caresses? She may have vaguely comprehended something of this silent struggle by the testimony of his stern brow and compressed lips; for she turned upon him an anxious, deprecating look, as though to ask forgiveness for arousing such a tempest within him. But he only said, very sadly,

“How much harder is life than death, often!”

“It would be,” she said, with sweet reproach, “if there were not the grand, full compensations of the eternal life.”

“Yes,” he answered, calmed inexpressibly by her words. “After all, when one has fought one’s way through the sharp moments of life, there come even here rewards that are absolutely divine in their comforting power.”

“And how much more satisfying it must be,” she rejoined earnestly, “to look back upon a life that has bestowed rather than received happiness!”

“Yet it includes many bitter moments,” he added, with a little depression she was quick to perceive.

“True; but these make the martyr’s crown,” she answered, still brightly, rising, and gathering up her work as she spoke.

"Must you go?" he asked regretfully, as he saw the movement.

"I ought to. Harry is out, and Clare all alone."

"And I, instead of giving you rest and peace, have only disturbed and troubled you," he said remorsefully.

"No. I feel strong and bright for this hour's revelations. All my life through, I shall remember and be thankful for it."

He looked at her, puzzled, yet half-guessing her deep meaning; while she, though blushing deeply as she felt he was reading her very soul, added, in low, fervent tones,

"You have given me a joy I can never lose."

CHAPTER XXI.

ROSE went directly to her own room on reaching the house, as Harry had met them at the entrance and carried Frank off—ostensibly for a game of billiards.

The moment they were alone, however, Harry exclaimed earnestly to his friend,

“Frank, I have bearded the lion in its very den! Captain Headley being away, I have spoken to his wife about this curious matter.”

“With very little satisfaction, I fear,” he answered, all his gloom and despondency seeming to return.

“Well, I am not altogether discontented with the result.”

“I wonder you dared approach her. She can be very savage when she chooses.”

“I did not give her much chance; beginning with the simple demand, in your name, for Agnes’ address.”

“Which, of course, she refused.”

"In effect, yes; but I imagine the principal difficulty is its impossibility."

"How do you mean? She must certainly know—"

"She may make a fair guess, as we can; but no more."

"Harry, you are trying to break something to me. Don't hesitate, old fellow. Do you imagine any shock can disturb me now?" and he smiled with an air of patient bravery, harder to behold than the most violent outburst of grief.

"It is only that I suspect a new attempt to deceive you. Remember, it is only a vague suspicion yet," he added hastily, as Frank looked up with eager hopefulness.

"No matter: tell me quickly!"

"I openly accused this woman of falsely asserting Agnes' existence, not really imagining the experiment would accomplish anything; but, upon my word, she was so confused and bewildered, I began to suspect my guess was very near the truth."

"Good Heavens!" he murmured, growing so lividly pale with the strong revulsion of feeling, that Harry was seriously alarmed for a moment, as he added soothingly,

"Don't give way, Frank, dear fellow. I may be wrong even now—"

"If you are, this is awfully cruel!" cried Frank passionately. "You do not know all that this hope means to me."

"Don't think I have trifled with you, Frank," urged Harry, bitterly distressed at the effect of his words. "I fancied even this shadow of comfort would be welcome to you."

"It would be, but for the fearful suspense it involves. How are we ever to learn the real truth?"

"I will find some way, and that quickly," replied Harry eagerly. "I want to catch Captain Headley on his return, before his wife can warn him of my purpose; and it will go hard with me if I do not make him tell the whole story."

"That might be practicable," observed Frank, more calmly; "he is brave enough under his wife's guidance and control, but in her absence he is weak and yielding to an extreme."

"And here he comes, very opportunely," said Harry, as Captain Headley rode slowly past the window, looking so wearied and dejected, that even in that moment of supreme pain and doubt Frank could not fail to deeply pity the unfortunate man, who, with all his weaknesses and faults, was still a father—and just now a very unhappy one.

They both passed through a side door, and

stepped out upon the lawn, taking a cross-path, which brought them close to Captain Headley as he was in the act of dismounting near the stables.

Waiting an instant till the groom, who led away the horse, was out of hearing, Ashton asked with cordial kindness,

"What news have you now? I know you would not have returned without finding the fugitives."

"Would to God I had not!" groaned the wretched father. "Even suspense was better than this."

"Why, what has happened?" said Hilton in deep concern at his unfeigned misery. "Where did you find them?"

"At the hotel at Windsor," he answered half-reluctantly.

"Why, then, did you not bring her back with you?" asked Ashton in great surprise.

"The scoundrel actually laughed at the idea."

"He could not dispute a father's right," interposed Frank indignantly.

"How could I control him?" asked Captain Headley perplexedly.

"You needed but to insist on her return—" began Ashton.

"But could we then even compel him to marry her?" he asked, looking so weakly bewildered that

Ashton felt strongly impelled to shake him into some sort of energy.

"You do not know the man!" he exclaimed vehemently. "Nothing is further from his thoughts than marriage—"

"My poor Kate!" cried the unhappy father, clasping his hands in sudden despair.

"But tell us," cried Frank impatiently, "what did Cameron say? How did he act?"

"He tried first to speak of it as a mere frolic; that they meant to come back to-day."

"Just like him," muttered Ashton angrily; "but how did you answer him?"

"I told him, when he refused to come back with me, I must return to see what my wife would decide should be done—"

"What fatal weakness!" interrupted Hilton, starting forward impetuously. "Don't you see how you merely gave them a chance to disappear more effectually?"

"O, no!" returned Captain Headley a little triumphantly; "they both promised to wait there—"

"Upon my soul," cried Harry aside to his friend, "this man's weak, irresolute conduct is actually criminal!"

"He cannot help it, poor fellow!" returned Frank in the same tone. "A lifetime's bondage to

an unscrupulous, overbearing woman has long ago crushed all manliness and independence out of him. I cannot forget, however, that this poor misguided girl is Agnes' sister, and I shall ride to Windsor at once, to see what can be done with that scamp."

He beckoned to a passing groom as he spoke, and hastily ordered a horse to be got ready for him as quickly as possible.

Captain Headley looked up in surprise, asking, "You want me to go back again?"

"No," with abrupt determination; "I am going myself to deal with Cameron as he deserves."

"You will not attempt any violence?" with alarmed apprehension.

"Do not fear," he replied with undisguised contempt; "he will not provoke it. Rest content that your daughter shall have the husband you have desired for her."

"Let me first ask Mrs. Headley—"

"Never! Can you not be man enough to see there is only one way of dealing with this fellow?"

"But still—"

"I tell you, no! I claim my right to interfere in Agnes' name,"—his voice softened as he spoke more calmly,— "and will ask no one's permission to do my duty."

The groom bringing up his horse as he spoke, he sprang impetuously into his saddle, and in another instant was riding away at headlong speed.

Harry looked after him for a moment in earnest admiration of his manly vigor, his noble resolution, and was genuinely puzzled as he beheld Captain Headley's look of alarmed regret.

"Surely," exclaimed Ashton in bitter contempt which he could not repress, "you can only feel the deepest gratitude for Hilton's generous kindness!"

"He is so impulsive!" hesitated the weak, vacillating father. "If he should offend or attack Cameron—"

"It would be the best thing he could do. No other course could have any good effect, though I should despair of even that."

"I must tell Mrs. Headley, nevertheless," he replied uneasily, making a move toward the house.

"Stay one moment," said Harry, gently detaining him; "you must feel that Hilton has an undeniable right, from his connection with your family, to take the initiative in this matter. You may trust him to guard its honor carefully."

"You mean—" looking puzzled and uncertain, as if fearful of speaking plainly.

"His former engagement to your eldest daugh-

ter," suggested Ashton with affected indifference, while he keenly but covertly watched his companion's weak face, so full of dread and doubt.

"Oh, Agnes ! yes, what a sad thing that was !" and he looked uneasily at Harry, as if anxious to escape further questioning.

"You must have felt her loss very much," observed Harry tentatively.

"Yes, she was so gentle and good," he muttered, almost inaudibly ; adding, with a sort of desperation, "I must go now : my wife will be waiting to hear about Kate."

"True : I will not keep you. Only," with carelessness of tone and mien, as he walked by Captain Headley's side towards the front entrance, "where is Agnes now, Captain Headley ?"

"Where is Agnes now ?" he repeated, with a consternation that Harry felt could not be assumed. "Good God, Mr. Ashton ! how can you ask me that ?"

"Certainly not with any hope of an answer," interposed the soft, cautious tones of Mrs. Headley as she came rapidly forward on seeing them approach, and was just in time to catch these last words.

For an instant Harry felt completely baffled and checkmated ; but as he summoned courage to

look boldly in her face, he saw a quickly suppressed gleam of triumph in her cold eyes, as she marked his momentary confusion, which revived the suspicion he had nearly abandoned as unfounded, and prompted his rousing every energy to accomplish yet his object.

"Have you not trusted Captain Headley with that secret?" he asked very good-humoredly.

"Not sufficiently to have it made known to you," she answered coolly. "What news of our dear Kate?" she added, turning to her husband very sweetly.

"She is at Windsor, with Cameron," he replied with nervous trepidation, as though uncertain what answer he was expected to make.

"Indeed! And when are they coming back?"

"They did not—at least, Frank Hilton has gone over now—"

"Frank Hilton!" she cried, with sudden uncontrollable passion. "How dare he meddle with our affairs?"

"Has he not a right, growing out of your recent assertions?" asked Harry with quiet sarcasm.

"Certainly not," she retorted sharply, "were he even Agnes' husband."

"My dear," ventured Captain Headley, with a temerity which seemed to surprise himself,

"ought not his having been engaged to our poor Agnes—"

"Fiddlesticks!" she exclaimed, flashing on him a glance of deep resentment, and imposing silence on him by an expressive gesture, as she tried to speak more calmly. "What right can surpass a parent's to arrange the concerns of his family without the interference of strangers?"

"I fancy, nevertheless," observed Harry composedly, "that Frank will do more towards accomplishing the object you have in view than Captain Headley could."

"And what, in your officiousness, do you imagine to be the object I have in view?" she asked angrily.

"Your daughter's marriage to Alfred Cameron, apparently," he answered complacently. "It really has become something of a necessity, I think."

"And you fancy Frank Hilton will do anything to further that?" she asked in genuine surprise.

"As matters stand he will of course, however much he might have disapproved of it before," replied Harry, puzzled at her unexpected question.

"Whether he condescends to approve or not," she

answered with veiled irritation, "he had best not attempt to prevent it!"

"He certainly will not," returned Harry gravely. "You need not fear the family's honor or good name will lose anything in his hands."

"So much the better for his own future connection with it," she replied bitterly, as she took her husband's arm somewhat forcibly, and drew him away towards the entrance; adding suddenly, with an appearance of alarm, "You ought not to say such things before my husband, Mr. Ashton. You do not know how terrible his anger can be!"


Harry stood looking after them in profound astonishment. That Captain Headley was really on the verge of a burst of anger he did not for an instant believe; yet his wife's evident desire to impress him with that idea was very puzzling. He had been watching him closely ever since Mrs. Headley joined them, hoping for some faint betrayal by word or look of the truth he had not yet discovered, shrewdly as he suspected its nature. At Mrs. Headley's last words, audaciously referring to Frank's future connection with her family, Harry saw her husband's one surprised glance of inquiry quickly averted as she imperiously frowned upon it; and he could only guess that it was in fear he had detected it, and might attach some meaning to

it as well as to divert his attention from it that she had made the absurd announcement of her husband's impending wrath.

"Poor wretch!" he muttered to himself, as he walked thoughtfully away. "How intensely ridiculous to threaten even a child with such a farce as his anger would be!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ROSE had not often many moments through the day in which she could retire to her own room and follow the bent of her own sweet will as to their idleness or occupation. Often the consciousness that she must ever be ready to respond with cordial willingness to her sister-in-law's many capricious demands on her time and patience faintly chafed and wearied her, with all her unselfish devotion to the invalid she so tenderly loved ; but on this day of all others she shrank in nervous weakness from every opportunity in which reflection could force upon her that full, clear sense of her position which she dreaded to realize. The great flood of thrilling joy which came with the knowledge of Frank's love had been checked and suppressed at the very moment of its instinctive perception by the revelation of the bond which held him so closely and cruelly fettered ; and even more for his sake than for her own, with all of a true woman's sublime self-abnegation, she had thought only of soothing his grief, and suggesting to him



calmer, more elevating thoughts during the short space in which they were together. Through all the rest of that long day she sought to be constantly occupied with Mrs. Ashton, showing, nevertheless, at moments such gleams of bright, agitated sensation as to excite even in her sister's self-centered nature a vague curiosity as to their cause.

But the necessity of dressing for dinner sent her at last to the quiet solitude of her own room ; and then standing face to face with the love which became indeed a martyr's crown, with its mingled glory and suffering, she paused in breathless, hushed contemplation of the truth, so precious, yet so cruel. Perhaps if there had ever been an instant of hopeful joy in knowing that Frank loved her, the recognition of the relentless barrier which so fatally separated them would have been fraught with anguish indeed. As it was, with no sense of disappointment or regret, she could enter, with a pure, innocent joy such as heaven's angels may feel, on the simple thought of a love which claimed no visible existence in this lower world ; content to wait with divine patience for its fruition hereafter.

Thus, with tender thoughts of Frank, and with gentle sympathy even for the unfortunate Agnes, for whom she felt more pity than envy in her prospect of becoming a coldly-loved wife, Rose, with

her usual forgetfulness of self, scarcely realized her own future of lonely, dreary existence. In truth, absolute loneliness, utter dreariness, were impossible to her nature, so full of self-sacrifice, so glowing with zeal for the happiness of others. Her noble, generous heart must ever find fitting objects of interest awaiting on all sides her tender ministrations; a glorious life-work ever before her, claiming every thought and energy, till heaven's portals should one day uncloset, giving rest and peace at last to the ardent soul which had never been weary with well-doing.

Thus, deeply meditative, yet not unhappily so, Rose slowly made her toilet that day, singularly impressed with a feeling that each trivial detail had become suddenly of weighty import—as though she were indeed at the same time enrobing her trembling, longing soul with comfort and strength for all her future life.

When she came forth to join the others, as the dinner-bell resounded through the house, her air of bright exaltation, of calm serenity, especially attracted Harry's attention. He had felt some anxiety lest she might not have remained all this time quite fancy-free, while thrown so unreservedly as she had been in the frequent society of Frank Hilton; and not daring now to venture on one word or

question which might awaken her still slumbering consciousness, he could not refrain from an unwonted embrace and half-laughing kiss, as he exclaimed lightly,

"Really, Rose, you look particularly nice to-day."

"Yes," observed Mrs. Ashton, looking attentively at Rose. "Have you not worn that dress before? It is really very becoming."

Rose laughed a little gleefully, as she answered, with a gayety not all assumed,

"If I make such a sensation with you, will it not be unmerciful towards the others to appear in the dining-room?"

"O, no," answered Harry; "it will do them all good to see your fresh, bright face. No one can ever be too charming."

"Then we will proceed," returned Rose with a mocking smile and gesture, as they moved on towards the stairs.

On reaching the dining-room Rose was relieved to find that Frank had not yet taken his seat: feeling a curious trembling sensation at thought of meeting him, she was glad to have time for control. As dinner went on, however, and he still failed to appear, a new anxiety took possession of her, and she vainly endeavored to be enough interested in

the conversation going on around her to take any part in it.

It was not long, however, before Mrs. Wayland asked vivaciously,

"What have you done with Mr. Hilton, Miss Ashton?"

"I?" answered Rose, a little startled and flushing slightly at the question. "You must not hold me responsible for his absence. I do not even know where he is."

"Was it not you who sent him off post-haste on a mission somewhere?"

"No," with a sudden sense of anxiety, though she still strove to speak lightly. "Has he really gone away?"

"I only know, as we were coming up from the beach, we saw him riding away at a furious speed."

"Ashton must know," observed Fred Maynard lazily; "he stood looking after him as he went off."

"Yes," said Ashton dryly, "I do know, but it is a State secret."

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Wayland reproachfully and in a flutter of excitement, "the more it is a secret, the more we want to be told. Do give us at least a hint, Mr. Ashton."

Harry shook his head mysteriously, resisting all her clamorous entreaties and persuasions, till,



wearied at length with his obstinacy, as she called it, Mrs. Wayland turned pettishly to Fred Maynard, saying,

"Have you heard about the Headleys going away?"

"No," he answered, surprised; "have they actually gone?"

"Very unexpectedly, it would seem. Not an hour ago a messenger came in hot haste and summoned them away."

"But they may mean to come back."

"No; they left word for their baggage to be sent down to Windsor after them: but why they have gone there in such a hurry, I cannot imagine."

"Well, I can tell you that," returned Fred Maynard. "I understood this morning that Captain Headley had come back, reporting he had found the fugitives at Windsor."

"And they were sent for afterwards?" asked Harry.

"So it seems."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Wayland eagerly, "if I could only understand what it means!"

"You must be satisfied for the present with another piece of news," answered Ashton coolly.

"But nothing could be so interesting," she pleaded.

"Ask Maynard: I saw him looking over the register just now.

"Some new arrivals? Do tell me!"

And even Rose looked a little curiously at her brother, fancying some new joke.

Fred Maynard's sudden flush and look of annoyance were too evident for concealment; and as they awaited his answer with various degrees of impatience, he felt compelled at last to speak with some degree of assumed indifference,

"Ashton means the Morton family, I suppose."

"Are they here?" slowly said Mrs. Wayland, trying to look pleased. "The girls will make our party quite lively again."

"Exactly," said Harry somewhat maliciously. "Maynard can return to his allegiance, and permit Mr. Morton once more to bask in the sunshine of Mrs. Wayland's smiles."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the fair widow, flushing angrily now, yet wearing an irrepressible air of mortification. "You know very well, Mr. Ashton—"

"You surely will not persist in your former cruelty," he interrupted, still with apparently good-natured raillery, but not meaning to entirely veil the covert sarcasm which pointed his words.

Some half-whispered words of intended consola-

tion from Fred Maynard afforded Mrs. Wayland a pretext for leaving this remark unanswered ; and very few minutes later a general departure from the dinner-table ended a discussion which was becoming not quite comfortable.

As they passed out on the piazza and formed a little group by themselves, Mrs. Ashton said languidly,

“Why did you tease those two delinquents so, Harry? I almost pitied their embarrassment.”

“Was I unmerciful?” he asked mockingly. “The truth is, this affair of Cameron’s has put me very much out of conceit with flirting just now.”

“But they never meant any such serious—”

“How can you tell what a flirt, whether male or female, ever means?” retorted Harry; “probably even Cameron proposed only an ‘innocent flirtation,’ as he would call it, at first, until the mother’s criminal negligence tempted him further.”

“How curious the Headleys’ sudden departure seems!” said Mrs. Ashton with her usual serene complacency. “I suppose Mr. Hilton’s absence has nothing to do with it; only it is a very odd coincidence.”

Rose’s eager look of breathless inquiry, quickly checked and withdrawn, with mantling cheeks, as her brother looked earnestly and anxiously at her,

decided him to defer no longer the intelligence she so craved to hear ; and he answered quietly,

"I suppose he is still at Windsor. When Captain Headley returned, having found the runaways there, and left them, with his usual weak incapacity, Frank rode over at once to keep them in sight, and see whether vigorous treatment might not compel Cameron into more honorable views than he seemed to entertain. I fancy it was at his summons that the rest followed so hastily."

"I wish he would come back himself," observed Mrs. Ashton impatiently; "I want so much to hear all about it."

"I am afraid it will be a very sad story," replied her husband reflectively. "How frightfully that foolish girl has wrecked her whole life !"

"Do you think he will refuse to marry her?"

"They will probably find some way of enforcing that," he answered ; "but what a future is that for her—to rejoice, as her only hope, in marrying such a scamp !"

At this moment a note was placed in Harry's hands, which the servant said had just arrived by a special messenger.

As he hastily tore it open Mrs. Ashton's eager inquiries and Rose's one glance of intense interest, as she recognized Frank's writing, led him to com-

municate its contents as quickly as he could master them.

"He says," half-reading as he went over it, "that he stayed at Windsor till the Headleys should arrive, being fearful lest Cameron would again give them the slip; but he believes there will be no difficulty now in their being married without delay, and he will then return at once."

"How good and self-sacrificing he is!" murmured Rose, in a glow of ardent enthusiasm, as she felt all the generosity of his conduct towards those whose bitter, persistent enmity had so shadowed and darkened all his life.

"Good, indeed!" replied Harry with strong earnestness. "It remains for us to learn by what means he has accomplished this result. Cameron has not been easily persuaded, or by mere argument alone!"

"What do you mean?" asked both Mrs. Ashton and Rose at a breath.

"I can only guess," replied Harry more soberly. "With Frank's strong feeling of reverence for Agnes Headley's memory, he would sacrifice half his fortune, if necessary, rather than have one reflection cast on the name she alone has worthily borne."

Rose looked in speechless surprise at him, not

daring to question his calm reference to Agnes' memory, yet wondering that he seemed so gravely to accept her death as a certainty.

Rightly interpreting her thoughts, and fearing to give too strongly his own impressions on the subject, Harry turned to her, saying softly,

"I speak perhaps more from my wishes than my knowledge, little Rose. I am so very anxious Frank should be freed from this bond, that I cannot patiently accept its possible existence."

"Still, if it is so," she answered bravely, "there is the great comfort of seeing him relieved from that bitter self-reproach which has so tortured him for years."

"As if this new torture would not be infinitely worse! No, Rose; he has been too morbidly unreasonable hitherto in cherishing a grief which did not result from any wrong-doing of his. Better would be his chance of happiness in throwing off that burden, and finding a new and brighter life in the future, freed at last from its memory, than in forging again the chain whose very remembrance has so troubled him."

"Yet it seems to me he has no choice," she answered persistently. "He must not break his word if its fulfilment is claimed."

"I am not sure even of that," replied Harry

gravely. "I cannot advocate the sacrifice of his whole life to a mistaken idea of honor."

"And I," she replied with gentle enthusiasm,—“I would advise and uphold him through every difficulty or disaster to hold fast to his pledged word above all."

"Your spirit is very charming in theory," he answered as they now rose to return to their rooms; "but practically it would involve terrible suffering for more than one heart."

Rose did not answer him, but walked thoughtfully by his side, pondering and weighing his words in her heart, the while in earnest meditation.

Restless and anxious about Frank, they all deferred till a very late hour retiring to their rooms, in the hope of learning at least that he had returned before seeking their own slumbers. At length, however, Mrs. Ashton's evident weariness rendered further delay impracticable; and Rose sought her own room, very wearied and discouraged.

Sleep was impossible to her anxious impatience; and, looking back at her former vigil with a wistful, longing feeling, as though years rather than days had since elapsed, she sat down by her open window, having extinguished her light, determined to watch for some token of Frank's return.

Long after midnight a faint distant sound, as of the tramp of a horse's feet on the hard road, was softly borne upon the air. Not many minutes later that dear familiar step came cautiously down the silent corridor, half-pausing as it passed her door, and then the closing of his own assured the patient watcher of her granted prayer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH a longing, restless impatience to hear the result of Frank's self-imposed mission, yet trembling in her inmost soul at thought of any new revelation of exalted goodness which would more than ever subdue every feeling to the sweet influence she no longer had any power to resist, Rose could scarcely await the usual hour for leaving her room the next morning. But while she did by many minutes anticipate it, even then she found Frank softly pacing the corridor to and fro, watching for her. As she came out with shy sweetness he eagerly approached her, holding her frankly extended hands tenderly in his, while he gazed with speechless longing far down into the serene depths of her eyes, till they drooped at last, and she turned half-away from him in blushing confusion.

He would fain have spoken, and so end the ordeal of this delicious silence, which overwhelmed every faculty and threatened to destroy the self-

control he had so sternly endeavored to observe ; yet he feared even to trust his lips with speech, lest the barriers within which he had sought to restrain it would yield at the first utterance of her dear name, and in a full tide of burning eloquence would come the avowal he had resolved never to make.

Rose was the first to speak, as she realized the mighty force of that silence and shrank before its possible ending. Gently withdrawing her hands from the clasp which so unwillingly relinquished them, she said, with carefully steadied tones,

"You have not had much rest, I am afraid. You came home so late."

"And yet," he answered, with a grave smile, "for that very reason I was too utterly wearied not to sleep soundly, with all my anxieties."

"May I ask of your success?" she asked, diffidently, half-fearing to pain or embarrass him by the question.

"It is difficult to know what is success in such a case. So many widely varying hopes rested on the enterprise, that naturally all could not be gratified."

"But your own wishes—"

"Were partly accomplished. I was fortunate enough to smooth away all difficulties ; so that on

the arrival of the Headleys their daughter's marriage took place at once."

"So soon!—and then you returned immediately?" asked Rose, hurriedly confused and shocked, as she realized somewhat of the bitter, thankless task he had undertaken.

"I only stayed to complete the arrangements I had made, and to make one last effort—Rose," he added, with sudden passionateness of look and tone, "in the strength of the wild, delirious dream which so utterly absorbs my very soul, I even humbled myself before that woman, hoping, in that moment when some faint impulse of gratitude ought to assert itself, that my entreaty would no longer be denied—that she would at least remove this fearful burden of doubt, which so fatally clouds every hope and thought of the future."

"Could she still refuse?" asked Rose indignantly, "when you had rendered her such a service—had saved her daughter from such a fate? Could she not be womanly?"

"Womanly?—never! She would not know the meaning of the word. It would seem indeed that only a fiend could persist then in such cruelty; but—she did persist in it."

As he spoke, such a look of fierce gloom came into his eyes, that Rose dreaded even the utterance

of one incautious word, lest it should carry his suffering beyond the patient endurance he so evidently struggled to maintain ; and with a quick sense of relief she now greeted Harry as he came from his room.

“Will you go to Clare, Rose ?” he asked, as he surveyed her pale, agitated face a little anxiously, after tenderly kissing her quivering lips. “She wants you for some toilet dilemma, I believe.”

Half-grateful for the reprieve, yet wishing, woman-like, that she could first have spoken one word of comfort to Frank, much as she had hesitated while it was yet possible, Rose hastened to comply with this request, while Harry eagerly questioned his friend of the result of his ride to Windsor.

Frank repeated briefly very much the same account as that to which Rose had just listened ; but Harry asked abruptly as he paused,

“I know too much of Cameron to believe he was easily influenced to this step. You must have made a great sacrifice, Frank—”

“Could anything be a sacrifice to save that girl, Agnes’ sister, from the fate she had so madly braved ?”

“Still, had Captain Headley possessed a spark of manliness—”

"It would have been of no avail. His wife would never have permitted him to threaten Cameron. Even the boy Robert, in the first excitement of grief and horror when he would have spoken roughly to Cameron, was promptly checked by the mother, who was quite content with the situation of affairs."

"And the girl? She at least must have been abashed—"

"Not at all! That woman's training was too effectual to have left to the girl any natural modesty. Heavens! when I think what even Agnes may have become, during these ten years of such subjection—"

"Hush, my dear fellow! do not torment yourself with such thoughts. If she indeed lives, remember she may have inherited from her own mother a more incorruptible nature, not to be so utterly perverted."

"If I could only know the truth!" poor Frank cried desperately.

"But surely, after so materially serving them, had you pressed urgently then—"

"Do you think I did not?" he interrupted, with gloomy bitterness. "Harry, I almost knelt before that woman, entreating for the entire truth, and all in vain still."

"But what does the woman hope to accomplish?" cried Harry angrily, as he felt in his inmost soul all his friend's utter despair. "She cannot make you marry Agnes, without some further revelation of her real existence."

"She means to keep me in suspense for a while, I suppose, until she fears I may be too strongly tempted to break this chain; and then she will strengthen it anew, forging link by link, in slow torture, till I am powerless in her relentless hands."

"Frank, you are too weak on this point. Strong and self-reliant as you are, usually, I do not understand this morbid despondency which so tortures you."

"Its force has crushed me too bitterly all these years to be resisted now," he answered wearily.

"You forget Rose," replied Harry with grave reproach.

"Would to God I could! Am I not almost maddened now, with all the pain before me? and must you so coldly—"

"Not coldly, Frank. But you needed to be reminded that you have more than your own happiness to consider."

"I know it, Harry—I know it! But are not my hands helplessly tied?"

"It would appear so ; but may not I find some way of freeing them ?"

"If you only could !"

"I do not yet despair. My own conviction is becoming very strong, that Agnes is not living—that you will never hear anything more from the Headleys of their claim in her name."

"If you could but force them to acknowledge this !"

"There is not much chance of that. They will probably disappear now utterly from your path ; content to have implanted at parting this last sting, from which they hope you will but slowly and imperfectly recover."

"And Rose ?"

Harry hesitated, as he saw his friend's deepening pallor, his look of agonized entreaty, and felt how cruel was the fate which forbade the answer his first generous impulse would have prompted. Then, with kindly yet utterly truthful accents, he replied gently,

"Be content with Rose's warm friendship just now, dear fellow. You will find the purest comfort and consolation there, while I try my hand at disentangling the intricacies which perplex you."

"And then—" with sudden eagerness.

"The future must be brighter, Frank."

"Never, without Rose!"

"Well, then, perhaps I may so cut this Gordian knot—"

"Hush! here she comes," whispered Frank, gratefully clasping his friend's hand as Rose rejoined them; and they proceeded to the dining-room, whither the breakfast-bell had summoned them some minutes before.

Fortunately, none there knew of Frank's visit to Windsor, or that he was at all especially interested in the Headley-Cameron affair; so he was spared all reference to it, although he had quite prepared himself to be rigorously questioned by the fair, inquisitive widow, who was always so eagerly curious for the latest news.

In truth, she was unusually quiet, for her, seeming rather depressed than elated by the arrival of the Morton party, yet listening with evident uneasiness to every reference to them that she chanced to catch.

Harry, seeking to cover Rose's pensive thoughtfulness and Frank's evident inability to converse, with his usual readiness, was quite inclined to resume the teasing of his opposite neighbors, which he had begun the evening before.

"I suppose we must not ask Maynard," he began,



"how far your wanderings carried you last evening."

"My wanderings?" he asked, with some confusion, while Mrs. Wayland looked at him with a sharp inquiry not tending to restore his composure.

"Yes; I saw you stealing quietly off among the shrubbery with your revived flame, Miss Carrie Morton."

"O," he replied, with affected nonchalance, "we did take a little walk."

"Just for old times' sake, of course."

"No," with more bravery than Harry suspected the need of. "I always admired Miss Carrie, and very gladly welcomed her back."

"Inconstant creature!" exclaimed Mrs. Wayland, with assumed sprightliness, which did not altogether conceal her disquietude. "Of course you have only flirted with me; but I was content to surrender the palm to Miss Ashton, on whom your serious admiration seemed fixed. What is to be said now of this new departure?"

Rose's air of sensitiveness at this unprovoked remark brought Frank quickly to the rescue.

"What is all this, Maynard?" he asked, with covert sarcasm. "Are you venturing upon a new flirtation so recklessly?"

"No," he replied, with sudden gravity, raising his head and looking calmly around with an air of resolution which took all by surprise, "I did not mean quite so abruptly to claim your congratulations: still, I am happy in announcing that my flirting days are over, of which I have become thoroughly ashamed; while I am proud of my acceptance by Miss Morton, to whom you must let me present you after breakfast."

It needed more courage than Frank guessed to make this announcement at such a moment and in that presence, yet Fred Maynard felt strongly how cowardly was his first impulse of silence, and by a brave effort cut himself forever adrift from the unworthy trifling, whose result he half-dreaded in his secret heart. He dared not glance at Mrs. Wayland, in mingled shame and delicate forbearance, knowing how justly she might accuse him of leading her to cherish too dearly the delusion he had now so thoroughly shattered forever. And, as she sat by his side, motionless, white to the very lips, she was faintly conscious how carefully all eyes, as well as his, were averted, and with what delicacy a light, almost frivolous conversation was kept up, whose sound reached her unconscious ears, without one word being comprehended, while she struggled bravely to appear unconcerned.

Meantime Rose had listened to Fred Maynard's words with many mingled sensations, in which relief was strongly prominent. His many efforts to win her regard had been too invariably repulsed to make her fear any uncontrollable attachment on his part, yet his preference had been so undisguised that she had been seriously annoyed and offended often by Mrs. Wayland's irritated remarks and jealous attacks. Glad to have all this ended, yet with pity for the fair widow's suffering, however much she had brought it upon herself by her trifling with such dangerous weapons, Rose was the first to speak, as Fred Maynard completed the avowal of his engagement.

"Miss Morton is such a sweet, lovely girl, Mr. Maynard," she said pleasantly, "we can indeed cordially offer our best wishes."

"Thank you very much, Miss Ashton," he answered, feeling profoundly all the delicacy of her words, yet too genuinely affected by them to make anything more than this simple acknowledgment.

"Of course I must accept Miss Ashton's example and congratulate you, Maynard," said Frank, with an effort at gayety. "Still, it was mean of you to secure the prize before I could even have a glimpse of it."

"O, there are two other sisters," he replied, laughing; "only be particular, when I present you, to observe which is which. My *fiancée* is blonde—"

"Let me also offer my good wishes, Mr. Maynard," interrupted Mrs. Wayland, with her usual sprightly tones, holding out her hand to him as she spoke.

As he glanced at her, meeting her calm, steady gaze, yet seeing in her pale face how sharp had been the blow he had with such apparent remorselessness inflicted, Fred Maynard felt, perhaps for the first moment in his life, bitterly ashamed of himself. Powerless now, however, to remedy the evil, he could only take her hand with sincere gratitude, saying earnestly,

"You have always shown me such kind friendship, Mrs. Wayland, that I value your good wishes very highly. I am afraid I have been good for very little yet in the world; but now, with so much to encourage me, I may turn over a new leaf—"

"And be a good boy," she answered, with something of her former flippancy. "For my part, I am afraid you will become stupid as well as good. Heaven defend me from the contagion of your example!—for if I too should give up flirting, what would become of me?" and with a laugh of gay mockery she shrugged her shoulders indifferently,

and rose, adding something about having letters to write.

A moment's silence ensued, in which the thoughts of all were variously occupied with the little widow's desperate efforts to conceal the wound they all saw too clearly.

As they presently left the dining-room, Fred Maynard came to Frank's side, saying impetuously,

"Upon my soul! Can any one talk of innocent flirting after all this? How can I dare even accept my present happiness when I see my utter unworthiness?"

"I cannot comfort you by one word in defense of flirting; yet it is so universal a crime—for such I regard it—"

"It is indeed criminal!" with a groan of deep self-abasement. "When I recall my responsibility in that wretched Headley affair, for having introduced Cameron to them, and then see that poor little Mrs. Wayland so bravely pretending not to feel my own heartlessness, I could almost go to Miss Morton and ask her to dismiss me, as altogether unworthy her honest love."

"No, my dear fellow: be thankful for the blessing you certainly have not merited, and accept it humbly. What man of us is ever pure enough to

deserve a good girl's love? And yet, is it not our only salvation?"

"Still, all this is bitterly humiliating. Let me confess the truth to you, Hilton, shameful as it is. I flirted desperately with Miss Morton before, hoping, with a man's usual vanity, to arouse by that means some interest in Miss Ashton, who was alone the object of my real regard."

"Do you mean—" began Frank, with irrepressible irritation.

"No, no; don't mistake me!" returned the other eagerly. "Miss Ashton always repelled every attention from me; but I fancy, from what Miss Morton admitted last evening, that their sudden departure before and unexpected return now were due to the effect of my foolish trifling with her. And, with the same reckless disregard of consequences, I flirted with Mrs. Wayland and Miss Headley, under the influence of the same absurd hope, only to reap a wretched harvest now of regret and self-reproach."

"I cannot make light of your errors," said Frank with kind but serious gentleness. "Still, you are making the only atonement possible; and surely, with such a lovely girl as Miss Morton seems to be, you must attain real happiness."

"More than I deserve," he answered, still peni-

tently. "She is very lovely and gentle—not unlike Miss Ashton herself, in her modest intelligence, her shyness and sweetness."

Frank smiled with quiet satisfaction, as he left him without another word.

CHAPTER XXIV.

As Frank overtook Rose, just at the entrance to the parlors, she paused to say to him, with her brightest look,

"I am so glad of this engagement!—and above all, of Mr. Maynard's whole tone in speaking of it."

"Why so?" pretending to misunderstand her, as the easiest way to cover the pain he felt in regarding by contrast the dreary loneliness of his own life.

"I have been a little unjust to him lately," she admitted, with winning frankness. "He seemed so frivolous, so ready to flutter from one new face to another, I could hardly believe him capable of a real, strong attachment."

"And you are satisfied of it now?"

"Of course," with a look of surprise and almost reproach. "Not only from his engagement, but he spoke in such an honest, manly way of his regret for his past flirtations, that I feel sure only a sincere regard for Carrie Morton could so have changed him."

"I am quite anxious to see this paragon, whose

influence has achieved such wonders. Will you point her out to me?"

Rose glanced rapidly over the groups scattered through the room, as she answered,

"They have not come in yet. I think I noticed that they came to breakfast quite late."

At this moment Mrs. Bradford came up to them, having just seen her husband depart for the city by his usual morning train.

"Good-morning to you both," she said pleasantly. "What a stranger you have been lately, Mr. Hilton!"

"I have been variously and not very agreeably occupied," he replied, "and indeed have almost turned night into day with my late hours."

"Report accredits you with even mightier deeds," she answered, with hesitating, well-bred curiosity.

"Report may only flatter when it does not speak truth," he observed evasively, not knowing what painful topic she might touch upon.

"What a libel!" she retorted, laughing. "I have heard many nice things of you, which I know were true."

"Then you must have had a more friendly informant than Madam Rumor."

"Perhaps. By the bye, Miss Ashton, have you seen the Mortons yet?"

"Not to speak to," replied Rose, with a demure smile. "I meant to have welcomed Carrie when she came on the piazza last night, but I could not exactly contrive it."

"Of course not. She disappeared instantly with Mr. Maynard, and was not seen again. Now all the world professes to have discovered an engagement—"

Rose's smile of mingled amusement and embarrassment caused Mrs. Bradford to pause and look at her for an instant in puzzled bewilderment, as she exclaimed,

"Is it really true? Has that inveterate flirt been caught indeed in the silken toils? He does not deserve that pretty, genuine girl."

"I think, Mrs. Bradford," interposed Frank, almost gravely, "that no man ever merits half the blessings which are showered on him; yet in this case Maynard fully appreciates his good-fortune."

"He ought to," she answered, with willful persistence. "Why, the man has, to my own knowledge, flirted with every pretty girl in the house—except Miss Ashton."

"Well, give him at least credit for sparing me," said Rose lightly, trying to cover her confusion at these words.

"I give him more credit than that, where you are

concerned," rejoined Mrs. Bradford significantly. "But here they come together, and their very looks betray them! Is it announced? May I congratulate them?"

"O yes," said Frank, as he hastened to meet them; "he told us at breakfast."

"It is just charming," whispered Mrs. Bradford confidentially, as she took Rose's arm and also approached the new-comers. "He has acted so sensibly, that I mean to forgive him all his past folly, and reinstate him entirely in my favor."

Greeting Miss Morton cordially, yet not too openly uttering the congratulations she was so impatient to express, Mrs. Bradford also held out her hand warmly to Fred Maynard, letting that gesture and her look of kindly interest alone convey the good wishes he at once fully and gratefully comprehended.

As Rose in turn pleasantly welcomed her friend, adding some whispered words which brought a lovely blush to her fair cheek, and a sweet, shy look of happiness to her quickly downcast eyes, Fred Maynard hastened to present Frank Hilton to his betrothed, with such an air of genuine exultation and honest joy that Frank could scarcely restrain a smile at his rapidly developed but unmistakable devotion.

And in truth the fair, gentle girl might well have inspired that attachment long ago. There was a soft, steady light in her blue eyes, which told of a strong, enduring regard, and a gentle yet firm expression about her sensitive mouth, which told of a yielding docility of character, tempered nevertheless with unswerving devotion to the right in all matters of principle. To Fred Maynard, whose impulses were all good enough at the outset, but who lacked firmness and courage to resist plausible temptations, she would be ever a sweet support in all hours of weariness or discouragement; a tender, loving comforter for moments of grief or misfortune, but a tower of strength indeed when weakness or trial should assail him.

They stood all together, chatting pleasantly for some moments; and then Mrs. Bradford left them, at the call of her little girl, who had some important petition to prefer in mysterious secrecy, which could not be deferred. Presently others came also to greet the fair girl, whose amiability had made her always a favorite amongst them; and the engagement so shyly admitted by her, while proclaimed in such glad triumph by Fred Maynard, elicited warm-hearted congratulations and good wishes in profusion.

Rose would quietly have withdrawn unobserved

by the busy throng around Carrie Morton. But her movement towards the door could not escape the keen eyes of Frank Hilton, who hastily followed her. As he overtook her in the hall, and she paused, at his evident intention to make some request, she drew her breath quickly, with a sensation that was almost fear, believing he would ask for another morning of that charming half-busy idleness of which so many of late had been indulged in by them under various pretexts.

But Frank was equally conscious with herself that the enjoyment of those hours was too dangerous for their peace now. Yet, dreading a dragging, monotonous day, in which either the seclusion of his own room or the busy hum of the social circle in the house threatened to be equally wearisome, he suggested now a long day in the mountains as a sensible excursion, if Rose could persuade Mrs. Ashton to attempt it.

"You think she could bear the long drive?" asked Rose doubtfully. "She has always found the motion of a carriage particularly trying, you know."

"But she is so much stronger now," he said, a little persistently, "and just the other day was wishing to try a ride. We need only go as far as she likes."

"Well, I will ask her. Come with me; she must have finished her breakfast by this time."

As they proceeded up the stairs together, Frank could not forbear saying, half-reproachfully,

"You are so completely absorbed in Mrs. Ashton you will not even say that you would like to drive yourself."

"You know I would," she replied pleasantly, yet blushing slightly as she met his ardent look. "Must your vanity always have the tribute of actual words? or are you too material to understand thanks which are not expressed?"

"Forgive me!" he answered penitently. "If it were only a question of vanity, I might not fear to be insatiable."

Entering Mrs. Ashton's sitting-room they were greeted by Harry with evident relief, as he said,

"Help me to persuade Clare to be reasonable, Frank."

"Can that be so difficult?" he asked, smiling.

"For once it is," he rejoined with earnestness. "She insists—"

"Let me plead my own cause, Mr. Hilton," interrupted Mrs. Ashton impatiently. "I am so utterly weary of sitting here day after day, while one wave of excitement after another surges through the house, of which I get only very un-

satisfactory echoes, that I am just longing to escape them all, if only for a few hours. Why cannot we go somewhere?"

"That is just what I came to propose," interrupted Frank. "You spoke lately of wishing to take a drive; and now, as you are so much stronger and the day is pleasant and cool, we might even reach the mountains, if you are so inclined."

"O, may I?" she cried, clasping her hands rapturously with such a glow of delight that he could only look at her in grave wonder that she should be so excited over so simple a pleasure.

"You are sure this is wise?" asked Harry apprehensively.

"Of course it is," she interposed petulantly. "You are so tiresome with your caution, you foolish Harry!"

"Only for your sake, my darling," he whispered reproachfully, more pained than he was willing to betray by her hasty words; and glancing uneasily at Frank, inquiringly, as he spoke.

"That is all right," said Frank cheerfully. "We need only go as far as Mrs. Ashton finds it enjoyable, you know; but my expectation is that she will want to go farther than the rest of us."

"I think so too!" she said eagerly. "Remem-

ber how long it is since I have been anywhere. Can we start at once?"

"In a very little while," he answered brightly. "I will select a comfortable carriage and a trusty pair of horses while you change your dress; and then we will be off. You must both remember," he added, turning to Rose as he spoke, "that you will need to take shawls. If we reach the mountains we shall find it much cooler there. Will you come with me, Harry?"

In eager, joyous anticipation, Mrs. Ashton addressed herself at once to the necessary preparations, vying even with Rose in her active movements, while Frank and Harry sought the stables to superintend personally the arrangements by whose careful study the invalid's comfort and repose were to be secured.

One motive animated all, in their eager desire to escape from all the painful associations, the depressing surroundings, of which they had become so thoroughly weary; and soon they were rolling smoothly along the shaded road, seeming at the very outset to gain new life and spirits at each breath they drew of the fresh morning air, still dewy and fragrant, as it was stirred by the light breeze that stole over the smiling landscape.

It was Mrs. Ashton's caprice to have Harry sit

beside her on the back seat, declaring she had been cross to him and must pet him now to make up for it. So Rose, very well content, took her place by Frank, who had assumed the reins. They rapidly drove past the lingering traces of civilization and entered the primitive forest, gradually reaching higher ground, until they found themselves losing all sounds denoting human existence, while the full choral melody of Nature's many tuneful voices alone greeted their ears. Silent and subdued they proceeded, scarcely even glancing towards each other, so enchained was every sense by the lovely spell which so inwrought them; yet not depressed, but only utterly content, speechlessly enjoying the delicious harmony, the deep repose, which so perfectly accorded with each one's needs.

In a low undertone, at length, as though dreading to profane the stillness with even her soft voice, Mrs. Ashton murmured in dreamy content to her husband,

"O, Harry, how delicious this is! Is it only because of my long illness that it seems so like a new and purer world to me?—or do you feel it too?"

"I have not your delicate perceptions, my Clare," he answered tenderly; "yet very much the same

thought was passing through my mind as you spoke."

"Does it not seem, when we so enjoy Nature in her perfect purity, that we ought never to have other surroundings?" asked Frank, turning to Rose as he spoke.

"If it were only possible," she replied, with a sad, wistful look that he readily comprehended.

"Still," he said, with a sudden change of tone, "what would life be worth, after all, if it were spent in this delicious, dreamy idleness? What sort of record should we leave at its close if we avoided all share in the great battle of existence?"

"True," she said, with more animation in her manner. "Since the conflict is before us, we must not refuse it—and yet, how wearisome it sometimes is!"

"But the rewards are glorious."

"In the end, yes. But there are so many defeats, so many disappointments!"

"Do you know," said Frank gently, "we seem to have changed places all at once. It is usually I who despond; you who divinely comfort me."

She made an effort to rouse herself more thoroughly from the languor which subdued her so strangely, as she said,

"I am not really desponding, even now; but I

felt for the moment so singularly free from all claim upon my sympathy or active service, it seemed an actual pleasure, if I may so call it, to be selfishly indolent."

He looked at her, puzzled, and almost alarmed, at her words.

"Do you feel entirely well?" he asked anxiously; "have you attempted too much in taking this ride?"

"O, no," she replied earnestly; "I think I am ready at any moment to be active and useful again; only I feel inclined to seize this rare chance of rest for my energies, while they are not in demand. You do not guess the positive luxury that thought bestows."

"Do I not?" he asked. "I do not know of a more effective remedy for the spiritual supersensitiveness, which so wears upon you, than just to have you yield utterly and always to this unwonted languor when it comes. You need, most of all, to lose that constant sense of care and responsibility—"

"Please don't," she murmured entreatingly, letting her hand rest for one instant on his arm in her desire to check his words; "you only unnerve me for the duties it is my joy to fulfill. They will never really harm me, in any sense worth considering."

"You say that," he replied reproachfully, "because you do not value even life as much as—"

"As duty? No. But you must not take from me the moral support which these cherished ideas give."

"Not while you depend upon it; but would it not be better to care more for yourself, and so build up a more real strength for the hour of need?"

"Perhaps it would have been wiser, once," she admitted thoughtfully. "But I should need to change my whole nature now. I am afraid my faults have become a part of myself."

"Your faults?" he said, trying to speak lightly to cover his deep feeling. "You have yet to point them out to me."

CHAPTER XXV.

THUS, sometimes in silence, sometimes in fitful conversation of varied tone and import, the bright, yet not lively party rapidly drove on through the lovely scenery which surrounded them, enjoying it all with a depth and intensity of feeling not often inspired by Nature's charms alone.

The hour of noon was nearly reached when they paused at last, having found an elevated plateau, well shaded from the sun's hot rays, yet commanding a magnificent view in every direction, where they proposed to rest for an hour or two for luncheon.

Taking the cushions from the carriage they arranged a comfortable seat for Mrs. Ashton, who was still full of energy and brightness, declaring she was far less tired than she would have been had she remained in her own room at Arlington House.

Frank could rejoice at the success of his experiment with both his fair patients; for when the moment for exertion came Rose was far more

fitted for it after her entire rest from anxious thought during so many hours than would have been the case had she kept up the usual strain upon mind and spirit which had almost become second nature to her. Blithely she tripped to and fro, attending to Mrs. Ashton's comfort, unpacking the lunch-basket, and even flitting gayly away to gather some tempting flower or ripe berries ; while merry fragments of song came almost unconsciously from her lips, as though her light-heartedness thus sought expression.

"How full of inspiration is this pure air !" she exclaimed ardently to Frank as he came to meet her and relieve her hands of the masses of wild clematis she had been gathering.

"Yes," he answered, looking wonderingly at her bright eyes and softly flushed cheeks, "you are absolutely transformed !"

"You will think me capricious," she observed, with a pretty pleading gesture. "A while ago I was so subdued ; and now—I scarce know why—I feel so strangely happy. It almost makes me fear something will happen to me—"

"Don't say that," he returned anxiously ; "why should you imagine possible grief or misfortune just now ?"

"Just because I could not actually realize it ;

and yet a sort of impalpable shadow seems hanging over me, which I do not see or feel yet—only I seem to know it is there.”

“Rose,” he cried, startled and uneasy at her singular words and look, “you are dreaming, dear child! You must not talk so absurdly.”

“Was I absurd?” looking a little puzzled at his grave face. “It was just a queer fancy I had—not worth troubling you with. Do I try your patience too much?”

“No,” he uttered slowly, “not my patience; but—”

“But what?” with suddenly resumed brightness.

“It is not easy,” he replied gently, “to keep always in the straight path appointed for one’s feet, You spoke so innocently and fearlessly of possible evil coming near you, that it tried my resolution sorely.”

“How could you have resolved—?” she began perplexedly.

“Do you not see, child?” he interrupted passionately, moved for one instant beyond his self-control by her gentle unconsciousness. “Would I not seek to guard and protect you at any cost—”

He checked himself abruptly, fearing to say too much, and thus disturb her quiet serenity of soul with the words of passion which trembled on his

lips ; while she, not fully understanding him, yet in gently pitying accents, said softly,

"If trial indeed comes, could I have a more efficient friend?"

"Rose," called Harry at this instant, "Clare and I are getting very hungry. Can't we have our lunch now?"

"Presently," she replied, with a merry assumption of independence. "Just let me arrange this clematis round Clare's cushions, and then we will begin our material feast of cold chicken, which you are so unpoetical as to prefer."

"We will enjoy the poetry and flowers afterwards," he answered with pretended impatience. "Never talk to a hungry man of such superficial things."

"But indeed, Harry," said Clare reprovingly, "I shall enjoy my chicken all the more for having this delicious fragrance round me. Rose always knows what I like."

Rose could only give Mrs. Ashton a beaming look of thanks as she turned hastily away to conceal the tears of joy which sparkled in her eyes at the unwonted thoughtful consideration of these words. As she did so, Frank, fully comprehending her feeling, whispered,

"Can you not see how much Mrs. Ashton is re-

gaining of healthy nervous tone, that she accepts so pleasantly now the efforts which once would only have chafed and irritated her with all your guarded care?"

"It is indeed a blessed change," answered Rose; "and do we not owe it most of all to you?"

"To a very slight extent only," he replied, shrinking a little from her ardent praise. "I have but aided her really good constitution to assert itself."

They addressed themselves now to the luncheon which Rose had daintily arrayed before them, and became quite merry over its enjoyment.

"It is a wonder," said Harry meditatively, "that we should find here, only a half-day's drive from the hotel, such a wildly primitive country. I suppose there is not a house within miles of us."

"Probably not," replied Frank, who was aiding Rose to put everything in readiness for their return. "We saw none as we came along; but yet I fancy there may be some houses in the valley beyond. The land in that direction shows some signs of cultivation."

"I wish we had time to go further," said Mrs. Ashton regretfully. "I would so like to hunt up some of the natives and see what sort of people they are."

"Could we do it, Frank?" asked Harry, ever ready to gratify every fancy or caprice of his wife's.

"I am almost afraid," he said doubtfully; then seeing her look of disappointment, he added reluctantly, "We might go a very little distance—just far enough to get a good look down the valley. You must remember, Mrs. Ashton, we have still a long drive home before us."

"I would rather give that up," she replied willfully. "Is there no place beyond the valley where we could stay all night and return to Arlington House to-morrow?"

"I think not," he said, with gentle firmness. "It is safest not to try too many experiments in one day."

They were soon again comfortably seated in the carriage, and following cautiously the utterly unknown road beyond, which grew wilder and rougher at each step; till at last Frank checked the horses, quietly announcing that it seemed impracticable to go any farther.

Mrs. Ashton so strongly expressed her regret at this, that Harry, in his easy good-nature, persuaded Frank to make one more attempt; but even he, as a very short distance was gained, saw the impossibility of proceeding. Gently soothing

his wife's impatience at this result, Harry told Frank to commence at once the retreat which was the only movement to be made, and the latter addressed himself to the undertaking with some misgivings about its successful accomplishment. The road was so little used, if ever, as to be entirely overgrown with weeds, while on each side of the carriage low, scrubby bushes grew close to the narrow track, leaving it a question yet to be solved whether they did not conceal stones or holes which would make it no easy task to turn even that light carriage among them. Frank took in the situation at a glance, and decided, in one rapid reflection, not to alarm Mrs. Ashton by pointing out the difficulties she could not aid in surmounting; and so, warily watching every movement of the horses, every development of the ground as it was revealed to him, by sheer skill and strength he contrived, he hardly knew how, to successfully get the horses' heads and the springy carriage fairly turned homeward again. He had just drawn a long breath of positive relief and self-gratulation, when a sudden cry from Mrs. Ashton startled the restive, impatient horses, already fidgeted by his previous maneuvering, and in one instant they were plunging and dashing over the rough, uneven road, at a very perilous rate. Even then no disaster might

have occurred ; but Mrs. Ashton, whose first cry had been caused by her sudden perception of a deep ravine by the side of the road, which seemed to her so close as to be under the horses' very feet, now, as they rushed so wildly on, rent the air with shriek after shriek, till the terrified animals became utterly unmanageable, and Frank, with all his strength, could only, by keeping them in the road, defer the final crash, which was too surely coming.

In another moment, which seemed an eternity in endurance, the fortunate breaking of the harness set the maddened horses free, just as they dashed the shattered carriage forcibly against some trees as it went over.

Half-stunned by being thrown violently to the ground, yet regaining partially his senses as the blood flowed freely from a cut on his temple, Frank staggered to his feet, looking wildly about him, yet in dread and inexpressible anguish lest he should behold some terrible sight. Not far from him Rose was lying motionless, with her face hidden by the rich masses of her hair, which becoming unfastened had fallen around her in great disarray. Trembling with a nameless horror he knelt by her side, and half-shudderingly took her hand softly in his. As she felt his touch she

stirred slightly, yet painfully; and then raised herself upon one arm as she looked at him with vague wonder.

"Rose," he cried passionately; "tell me if you are hurt!"

"Hurt?" she murmured half-unconsciously. "I do not know."

But even as she spoke a fuller sense of what had occurred forced itself upon her; and she sat upright, pushing back her disordered hair, and looking, with a still dazed expression, at the bruised and torn flesh of her wrist, from which a tiny stream of blood was slowly welling.

"Rose, my darling!" cried Frank, in bitter grief at this revelation. Slight as he saw at once the injury must be, the sight of her blood unnerved the strong man terribly.

"It is not—much—" she faintly said, as she saw his anguished expression.

"But are you sure this is all?" he asked, with new alarm.

"I think so—" she uttered slowly, as though scarcely able to recall her scattered senses. Then, with a sudden cry, she tried to rise, as she exclaimed,

"Clare! Harry! oh, go to them!—where are they?"

Almost shocked at his own absorption in the care of Rose, Frank saw now, with genuine relief, that Harry was supporting Clare in his arms, seeming unhurt himself ; while his wife smiled languidly at him as she leaned against him, apparently uninjured too. Recalled to himself and his manifest duty at this sight, Frank said gently,

"Will you rest here a moment, Rose, while I go to them?"

"No; let me go with you," she answered anxiously, struggling with her encumbering wraps as she strove to rise. Carefully aiding her in this, and satisfied by her movements that her torn arm was the only injury she had sustained, Frank supported her feeble uncertain steps, till they stood by the side of the others.

"How goes it, Harry?" said Frank, trying to speak cheerfully, as his friend looked up at their approach.

"Poor Frank!" he answered, as he caught sight of the still bleeding temple. "You seem to have had the worst of it. Clare does not appear to be hurt, as far as I can tell—"

"Nor yourself?" questioned Frank.

"I? O, no; except a little twist I gave my arm, as I tried to hold Clare. But that is nothing."

As he spoke, Frank was bending over Mrs. Ashton with some anxiety.

"Will you try to get up, Mrs. Ashton," he asked, at length. "We will make a more comfortable couch for you of the carriage-cushions, before I go to look up another conveyance to take us home."

"I don't feel much like moving," she said languidly; "still I will try:" but with a faint cry she sank back again in her husband's arm, at the first movement of her arm.

"What is it, darling Clare?" cried Harry with sudden alarm now.

But she made no reply, nor even opened her eyes: she had fainted as she fell; just as Frank's skilled touch discovered the broken arm, which that attempted movement betrayed.

"Be comforted, Harry," urged his friend, as Harry seemed almost dazed with terror. "She has only fainted."

"But is that all?" looking eagerly in Frank's face.

"No," he answered gently, yet with quiet firmness telling the whole truth; "her arm is broken—"

Harry could not repress a groan at this announcement.


"Do not give way, Harry," urged Frank; "I want all your strength and courage now. Rose too is hurt, but not so badly."

"My poor Rose," said Harry remorsefully.

But without wasting more time in words, Frank aided Harry to put Mrs. Ashton in a more restful position, satisfying himself as he did so that no other injuries existed; and then placing her arm so that it would be less painful, he busied himself first to restore her to consciousness.

Having accomplished this, Frank insisted upon examining, and binding with his handkerchief, Rose's still bleeding wound; and then leaving Harry in charge of both, turning resolutely a deaf ear to their entreaties that he would take Harry with him, he walked briskly away in a direction where he hoped to find some human habitation.

He wandered for some time hopelessly, seeking vainly for some place of refuge and shelter. All seemed dreary and desolate in the extreme; and he could almost believe his own was the first human existence ever present in these wilds. But at last his patient persistence was rewarded. A quiet little cottage, almost hidden by the dense foliage, revealed itself at a point very much nearer to the scene of disaster than would have appeared from



the weary round he had made before finding it. Here, within another hour, all were comfortably sheltered, while the necessary aid and medical attendance had been sent for; and they could at least rest while waiting.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FRANK felt too nervous and exhausted to trust his own unaided skill in the delicate task of setting Mrs. Ashton's broken arm. While awaiting the arrival of Dr. Ronald, the physician for whose summons from the city he had sent a telegram by messenger to the Arlington House, he hoped at least to soothe Rose's wounded arm by careful bathing, before re-bandaging it more scientifically ; but the sight of the torn and bleeding flesh of the fair arm, whose rounded, delicate whiteness had always seemed so lovely to him, so completely unnerved him, that with quivering lips he entreated Harry to undertake the task, the mere thought of which shook him to the soul.

Perplexed at his seeming weakness, when she had learned to regard him as equal to every emergency, as strong for every need, Rose looked wonderingly after him as he turned away in restless misery, while Harry tenderly ministered to the comfort she had fancied Frank would have claimed as his own care. She could not comprehend his

feeling ; and when her arm was more comfortably bandaged, and Frank came again eagerly to her side, looking in her face for the tearful pallor he dreaded to see there, Rose asked him, almost timidly,

“Did you fancy I would make some outcry which would annoy or disturb you ?” .

“No,” he answered gravely, scarcely daring to trust himself to speak, as he looked with tenderness upon the fair, serene brow, where no touch of earthly pain would seem to have power to leave its cruel impress. “I dreaded more my own want of nerve.”

“What a disgraceful admission for one of your profession !” she answered more lightly. “You ought to have become too used to such sights to be so sensitive about them.”

“So I should be usually ; but it was more than I could bear—” He stopped, with sudden paleness, which she regarded with wondering pity, as she said gently,

“It is not really very painful : now that Harry has bound it up again so nicely, it scarcely hurts at all.”

“And you are still sure you have no other injury ?”

“Except my broken bracelet,” she answered

laughingly. "You see how irretrievably that is shattered !" holding up some fragments of tortoise-shell as she spoke.

"Past all hope, I see," he said, taking them almost reverently in his hand ; then, after a pause, asking with strange diffidence, "Do you care for them?—may I have them?"

Looking up curiously, and encountering his eager gaze, Rose blushed a little as she said, in some confusion,

"They are not worth your keeping."

"But if I think they are—"

"You had better throw them away, and let me give you something better worth having."

"Would that be their fate at your hands?" he asked, not quite certain why she so hesitated to grant his simple request.

"Certainly," she answered; "no reconstruction is possible for them."

"Then, if you do not positively forbid it, I will keep them : only I wish you would actually give them to me."

"If you care so much," she replied hesitatingly, "you may have them ; only it is very foolish."

"Supremely so, no doubt," he said, with an exultation she regarded with puzzled bewilderment as he carefully arranged the fragile bits of shell so

that he could place them in an inner pocket of his note-case.

Idly chatting thus, they sought to wile away the long, tedious hours which must intervene before Dr. Ronald could possibly come. Mrs. Ashton had entreated them at first to procure some conveyance, so that they might return without delay to Arlington House ; but they had persuaded her, though with some difficulty, that none of them, much less herself, were fit for the wearisome journey.

The cottage in which they had taken refuge, though small, was clean, and not uncomfortable. The occupants, a woodman and his wife, cheerfully gave up their one room, which contained a bed, to Mrs. Ashton ; and she was lying there, almost contentedly, freed from all present pain by the cushioned rest which Frank had contrived for her arm. She even slept at short intervals, and after the first excitement was over took a curious interest, which was almost a pleasure, in recalling every incident of their drive, every detail of the accident, from whose very remembrance Rose still recoiled shudderingly.

Hour after hour passed, and the long evening shadows had silently stolen over the scene, lengthening and deepening until they all blended to

gether at last in the gathering darkness of approaching night, when the distant tread of a horse's feet proclaimed the doctor's long-looked-for coming. He had wisely chosen to ride over, both for greater speed and in view of the rough, uncertain road, which even now obliged him to dismount at a short distance from the cottage and walk the rest of the way.

All hailed his entrance with glad looks of relief and hope ; and first of all he was led to Mrs. Ashton's side, who was just awaking from a short, restful slumber, in which she had looked so placidly fair and contented it was difficult to believe she had indeed sustained any serious injury.

Dr. Ronald, having formerly known Frank Hilton, in the days when they pursued their professional studies together, now took him aside for a moment's hurried consultation.

"Hyperæsthesia?" he murmured. "I do not like in that case to use chloroform ; and yet how could she possibly bear the pain? What do you think, Hilton?"

"I should also dread chloroform. Would she suffer much, do you think?"

"More than she will have patience to bear, I am afraid."

"Still, there is such supersensitiveness on the surface—"

"True; that will be in her favor. Well, let us see."

Tranquilly taking a seat by Mrs. Ashton's side, Dr. Ronald quietly withdrew the light covering they had thrown over her arm, signing to Frank to come nearer on the other side to render any needed assistance.

As he stooped over the wounded arm, Dr. Ronald, partly to distract her attention from his movements, remarked upon the bracelet so prettily and curiously traced upon her wrist.

"Is this some improved style of tattooing?" he asked, in some surprise.

"The very latest style," she answered, smiling complacently.

"Have you, then, wandered even to the Sandwich Islands?" he questioned, in genuine perplexity.

"O, no! one of their most skilled tattooers honored me with this work of art." Then, laughing at his air of solemn bewilderment, she added, "Mr. Hilton was the artist."

"Hilton?" in still puzzled tones. "What a curious experiment to try with such a subject!" and

he looked almost reproachfully at Frank as he spoke.

"I assure you," said Frank, with significant warning in both look and tone, "Mrs. Ashton positively enjoyed the operation."

"Indeed I did !" she interposed eagerly. "It was really delightful, in contrast with most of my sensations, which are usually so tiresomely irritating."

Dr. Ronald looked at Frank in undisguised astonishment.

"Well," he exclaimed at last dryly, "I can only repeat, it was a very curious experiment."

"You must at least acknowledge its success," said Frank.

"Yes, yes ; its success is about as curious as the attempt. I am inclined to wonder if this too was one of your venturesome experiments," indicating Mrs. Ashton's arm as he spoke, with a gesture perceptible only to Frank.

"How can you imagine such a thing, even in jest?" muttered Frank indignantly,

"Why not, if it succeeds?" asked Dr. Ronald dryly, in an undertone.

"Do you mean—" began Frank, with sudden comprehension of his idea.

"Exactly. It must be acknowledged my task

here is easier and more within control than yours, empirical as it is."

"What are you talking about so oddly?" asked Mrs. Ashton petulantly.

"Your lovely bracelet," replied Dr. Ronald blandly; "I only wish I could see it more closely. Do you think you would mind my raising your arm—very carefully—just a little—that I may examine it to better advantage?" suiting the action to the word as he spoke.

He grasped her arm so skillfully, yet seeming only intent on the bracelet, that, almost before Frank could catch his idea and clasp her other wrist in anticipation of some resistance, with the merest movement of his hands Dr. Ronald had adjusted the fractured bone; and her arm again rested by her side, while only a quick-drawn breath denoted the instant's pain, which she scarcely felt, so absorbed was she by his words and unexpected action.

As he comprehended the complete and astounding success which had crowned the effort, born of such an odd inspiration, Dr. Ronald gravely drew back, almost breathless with a surprise in which the glow of triumph was strangely mingled with an overpowering awe.

"Upon my soul, Hilton," he murmured, as he

took Frank aside, "this is an absolute discovery of real value to science."

"It would be," replied Frank, shaking his head slowly at the other's enthusiasm; "only we might never again find a temperament just so affected, which would surely respond to this treatment. No: you were right to call it empirical. I am thankful enough for our success here, without any hope of accomplishing the same result in any other case."

"It will always be worth trying," returned the other persistently, as he turned to look again at Mrs. Ashton, who was watching them, as they talked apart, with vague, drowsy contentment.

After observing her for some moments with ever-renewed surprise, Dr. Ronald added,

"Can you get me some splints and bandages, Hilton? We must not risk her moving her arm before it is securely bound up."

As they again approached her, with such improvised appliances for this purpose as could be had, Mrs. Ashton looked up uneasily, shrinking visibly as she said, in alarmed tones,

"Are you going to set my arm now? I do not think I can bear it yet."

"O, that is already done," replied Dr. Ronald cheerfully. "I don't believe you minded it much—did you?"

"I hardly felt it !" she cried, with visible relief. "Why, I always imagined setting a broken bone was intensely painful. It is very curious !"

"People have not always your nerve," said Dr. Ronald, composedly arranging the splints and bandages as he spoke.

"My nerve !" she exclaimed, actually laughing now. "Don't you know, Doctor, my nerves are especially sensitive?"

"All pure nonsense," he coolly asseverated. "A strong man would have trembled and groaned under my hands just now, while you never moved or spoke."

"It is very curious !" she repeated thoughtfully ; adding, "Where is Harry ?" with a sudden perception of his absence.

Harry and Rose had been banished to the other room, lest they should feel too keenly the sufferer's expected pain ; and they entered now at Frank's summons, half-shrinking from the scene of distress they dreaded to behold.

Mrs. Ashton exclaimed quite excitedly, as soon as she saw them,

"Harry ! Rose ! I did not mind it at all ! What a fuss people must make about nothing, who talk about broken limbs so fearfully !"

"Mrs. Ashton was very brave," said Dr. Ronald,

in answer to Harry's look of bewildered inquiry. "It is all satisfactorily over ; and you have nothing to do but keep her quiet, and not let her talk too much, for a few days, till all danger of fever is past, and then she will be better than ever, again."

"I know one thing," she said determinedly ; "I don't mean to be kept shut up in future and denied every pleasure for fear of its doing me harm. Do you know, Doctor, that is the way I have been treated for ever so long."

"It is entirely unnecessary," he replied decidedly. "I shall take it upon me to change all that, and order that hereafter you are to do just what you please."

"Doctor, you are positively charming !" she cried, with bright animation.

"Of course I am ; but you must promise to keep quiet now."

"I will try. Only—"

"Well, only what?" smiling at her perplexed pause.

"I feel more like getting up and dancing," she confessed, with a little hesitation.

"Very likely : only you must wait a day or two for that ;" looking a little anxiously at her flushed cheeks as he spoke. One touch of his fingers upon her pulse warned him of the faint, insidious ap-

proach of fever; and in another instant he had prepared a soothing draught, which she obediently took in her new and ardent faith in this doctor, who so pleased her fancy. In a very few minutes he had the satisfaction of seeing her calmly sleeping; while Harry, after strongly clasping the doctor's hand, in thanks too deep for utterance, took his place by her side, only too content to watch unweariedly for any length of time over her healing slumber.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON reaching the outer room Dr. Ronald insisted on removing the bandages from Rose's arm and examining into the extent of her injury. Her nervous shrinking from his touch and the deepening pallor of lip and brow attracted his attention curiously.

Carefully as he endeavored to make the necessary investigation, without the least unguarded touch, he could only regard wonderingly her trembling, shuddering frame, which seemed to indicate a degree of suffering he could not comprehend or account for.

"Is it so very painful, Miss Ashton?" he asked, with pitying gentleness.

"No, not really," she answered shyly; "only—"

"Well?" as she stopped, as though scarcely knowing how to describe her sensations.

"I think," interposed Frank, who had been watching Rose very anxiously, "I think Miss Ashton is feeling more the reaction after so much painful excitement and suspense, than mere physical pain."

"I see," replied Dr. Ronald thoughtfully. "Overstrained nerves and overwrought sympathies must have their revenge physically, mentally, and even spiritually. Miss Ashton, I suppose you intend to help in taking care of Mrs. Ashton, nevertheless?"

With indignant eyes suddenly sparkling, Rose answered impetuously,

"Very certainly I shall! Could you imagine I would let this mere bruise keep me from caring for her?" But even as she spoke her momentary indignation subsided; and her eyes filled so painfully with tears, that Frank, regardless of the other's quizzically contemplative expression, took her hands tenderly in his, as he spoke with sober, wistful tenderness,

"You will not need to withhold any care she may require, Rose. We will contrive some rest for you now while she is sleeping; and to-morrow you will both be much brighter."

As she raised her eyes gratefully, while her lips still quivered with scarcely repressed emotions, Rose flushed and paled in sudden terror, as she saw that the carelessly dressed wound on his temple had reopened, and the blood was again slowly trickling down the side of his face.

But the sight at once steadied her nerves and

restored her failing energies, although she was pale enough, as she earnestly cried out while making him almost mechanically take the seat she imperiously indicated—

“How careless we have been of your suffering, Mr. Hilton. Don't you see, Dr. Ronald?” turning impatiently towards him. “Don't you see how he is bleeding again?”

And without waiting for the doctor's leisurely rendered aid, Rose bent compassionately over the wounded brow, softly bathing it with cold water, and tearing her handkerchief into strips to bind it more closely.

“Wait, Miss Ashton,” observed Dr. Ronald, composedly checking her in this act; “let me show you how to do it more scientifically. No bandage is necessary for that. Just press the edges of the cut together thus—” doing it so vigorously as he spoke that Frank winced with the moment's pain, and Rose's little fingers vainly essayed to prevent this seeming cruelty; “and then—” he continued, calmly ignoring her futile effort; “just cover it with this bit of plaster—so. Ah! that looks quite the thing now. With more practice, Miss Ashton, you would make a very efficient surgeon's assistant; only you must go to work more coolly.”

“That shows how little you know about it!” she

exclaimed, too indignant to measure her words. "If I went to work 'coolly,' as you call it, I could not do anything. It was only in a moment of desperation, when you did not seem inclined to move a finger yourself, that I could rouse myself to make such an attempt."

"Still you did it very well," with provoking complacency. "All this dainty shrinking from pain and unsightly wounds, as they are called,—though, for my part, I think nothing is more beautiful than the wonderful way in which a good clean cut can be—"

"Hush, for Heaven's sake, Ronald!" interrupted Frank. "You will make Miss Ashton think you a cold-blooded brute—"

"But that is just what I pride myself upon being."

"Nonsense, man! You should have seen him set Mrs. Ashton's arm, Rose," he continued, turning eagerly to her as he spoke. "His delicate, almost imperceptible touch was just magical; and he contrived it all with such wonderful skill, that she did not even know what he was doing till it was done."

"O, that was all professional," interposed Dr. Ronald lightly. "In a serious operation like that, it is necessary to avoid alarming the patient by any parade of one's intentions."

"Still—" began Rose, a little remorsefully.

"Forgive me for interrupting you," starting up suddenly as he spoke. "I cannot stay here all night very well ; and my poor horse must be in despair for my return. Do you know of any place nearer than Arlington House, where I can put up, Hilton?"

"There is a little village about a mile farther on, they tell me ; but I wish you could be nearer—"

"O, that will do very well. I must go back to the city to-morrow ; but I will see how you all are in the morning before I go. Miss Ashton," holding out his hand as he addressed her, and taking hers cordially in his grasp, "I wish I had time to have a longer discussion with you. You have some fanciful notions which I think I could set right—"

"It is just as well you have not time to try," she replied, with a little air of defiance which oddly became her face in its present animation.

"Indeed !"—quickly on his mettle now. "You doubt my power?"

"Not at all !"

"Well, then—"

"I merely deny its existence, as far as I am concerned."

"Wait till to-morrow," thoroughly roused now by her mocking smile.

"Very good : we will wait till to-morrow ;" and she stood looking after them for a moment, as Hilton and he went out together, with an intent thoughtfulness in which there was no longer any sadness or depression.

As they slowly walked to the place where Dr. Ronald had left his horse, Frank said meditatively,

"I am still confounded at Mrs. Ashton's so easily bearing that moment's torture. I had my own arm broken once ; and when it was set, all my resolution could not keep me from crying out, and I fainted the next moment."

"There are no two temperaments alike in the world," returned Dr. Ronald. "Now, you, with all your manhood, are prone to self-torture. If you were to indulge in it mentally, as well—and to tell you the truth, Hilton, you impress me as having that fatal weakness—"

"Do not judge me yet, Ronald," interrupted Frank, with nervous dread of his next words. "Some day I will tell you of the curious fatality which has followed me all my days, clouding their brightness, till I think I can fairly say I have resisted more of its evil influence than I have yielded to."

"And you think your bravery at one moment excuses your cowardice the next," with sharp sar-

casm. "Now, I think it only makes it more inexcusable."

He could not see the dark flush which rose to Frank's very brow at these words; but he took pleasure in the brave ring of his tones as he answered warmly,

"I cannot complain of your censure, Ronald. I have felt its truth bitterly of late, and regretted with all my soul the weakness I now see so clearly."

"Well said! But to return to Mrs. Ashton, who is so curiously your very opposite in every respect. While you are morbid and supersensitive mentally, she is so physically; and just as you have let one painful idea dominate all others, till it has become almost your only mental sensation, so her hyperæsthetic condition of body has absorbed or distorted the natural perceptions of transient or exceptional physical sensations. As I said before, it would be a valuable aid in the treatment of these curious nervous diseases if we could only form any trustworthy theory, which could be applied to all cases."

"That is the difficulty," returned Frank musingly. "These results are so arbitrary and unexpected, we cannot dare confidently to look for them; and their failure to occur when aimed at may do serious harm."

"Still in Mrs. Ashton's case so much has been accomplished, and this last success is so astounding, you may feel pretty sure that as she recovers from this accident the hyperæsthesia will have entirely disappeared."

"Do you feel sure of that?" cried Hilton with eager delight. "I have hoped, with time and careful treatment, to greatly ameliorate her condition ; but a positive cure—"

"Is to be credited to you entirely. I was not merely jesting when I asked if this accident was another experiment. The broken arm, so easily mended, becomes a positive blessing if it restores her health as completely as I believe it will."

"It is simply providential. Could I have been criminal enough," with an irrepressible shudder, "to have sought this result deliberately, how frightfully might it have miscarried !"

"Do you know," said Dr. Ronald meditatively, as he reached his horse's side and paused before mounting, "I am not sure Miss Ashton does not need more watchful care than even her sister."

"Miss Ashton ! Good Heavens, what fear have you for her?" cried Hilton, in an agitation that startled Dr. Ronald for a moment.

"Nothing so immediately alarming as you seem to imagine, Hilton ; only I am fond of studying

cases in other aspects than the merely physical. To continue our subject of hyperæsthesia, I should look for its development in her rather in a spiritual sense."

"Yes, I have thought so too," returned Frank, more calmly. "With all her seeming fragility, Miss Ashton has a remarkably strong constitution ; but she tries it fearfully."

"How so?"

"She has schooled herself, and it is also her nature, to give every thought and care solely to others ; and so neglectful of all her own higher needs, she has indeed reached a point where a very small added burden will break her down utterly. Her keen sense of pain at the lightest word, the merest breath, of discord or reproach, is so frightfully out of all reason, I could almost wish her a less sensitive consciousness, since it cannot be protected from what to her are the rudest assaults."

"And for this she needs most such a mental and spiritual tonic as I administered just now, in making her half-angry at what she regarded as almost brutality. Did you not see how it brightened and strengthened her?"

"Yes,"—with some doubtfulness of tone. "I have myself often roused her from moods of weak-

ness and depression by similar expedients ; but it did seem such a harsh, inhuman treatment—”

“Nonsense, my dear fellow. You might as well call it brutal to put a man in pain by setting a broken limb ; and yet how else should we set it? A little salutary restraint of Miss Ashton’s self-immolation would only increase by husbanding her resources of ministering to others, of which she is now so abundantly lavish.”

“Yet how to exercise such restraint ?” questioned Frank drearly.

“Where is the difficulty ?” with sudden peremptoriness.

“Harry only could attempt it ; and he would never see the need or wisdom of it. Poor fellow !—he is so absorbed in the care of his wife, he could not comprehend his sister’s constant martyrdom in their united service.”

“Well, if a man’s devotion to his wife is so pre-eminent, could not even that supreme care be given her ?” asked Dr. Ronald dryly.

A moment’s dead silence followed, in which Dr. Ronald half-repent-ed his question, fearing it had been fatally indiscreet. Then in strangely altered tones, whose hollow mournfulness struck a chill to his warm, sympathizing heart, Frank replied slowly,

"I will not affect to misunderstand you, Ronald. You must so easily have seen how dearly I love that sweet girl! But—my God!—it is a cruel fate!"

"What is it, Hilton? Why need any fate come between you? Take courage, man, and be the arbiter of your own destiny."

"It is beyond my control!—even Rose sees that."

"Do you mean you have put your two silly heads together, and decided to become mutually victims?" wrathfully cried Dr. Ronald. "Upon my soul, Hilton, you are weak indeed!"

"No, Ronald," answered Frank gravely. "It is no mere imagined bond, but a sacred claim of honor. I will tell you some day, but not now. I am too upset and shaken, to-night."

"You must tell me to-morrow," he answered resolutely as he mounted his horse, "and, please Heaven, I will throw all these difficulties to the winds. Good-night;" and in another instant he was gone.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE night passed not uncomfortably to the little party assembled in that humble mountain cottage, as Mrs. Ashton had fallen into a deep, tranquil sleep, from which she was not likely to awaken very soon, after all her fatigue and excitement; having also the added influence of the composing draught which Dr. Ronald had made her take. Rose was persuaded to lie down by her side, and seek for herself the rest she so needed. Frank and Harry, after talking half the night, managed to obtain some hours' sleep in the outer room, on an impromptu couch made of some shawls thrown over a pile of fresh straw; while the good people of the house, retiring to the only other apartment, which was a mere shed used as a kitchen, contrived also to sleep sufficiently, if not very luxuriously.

When Dr. Ronald returned in the morning he found them in various stages of improvement, and in animated discussion already as to the possibilities of returning to Arlington House. This, however, he positively forbade—for some days at

least: a little to Frank's perplexity, who had thought even Mrs. Ashton could bear the journey, with careful driving and frequent rests.

"I fear," he said, taking Dr. Ronald aside, "that all the discomforts here, the want of delicate food, and her usual luxurious surroundings, will annoy Mrs. Ashton more than would seem reasonable to the rest of us."

"Very likely; but that will do her more good than harm."

"You think so because the novelty amuses her just now, but very soon these things will chafe and irritate her—"

"An amusing distraction is the most agreeable, certainly; but even annoyances may serve the same good purpose."

"I see your plan now," observed Frank thoughtfully; "but will she need to be so guarded from fretting over her arm?"

"It is safest for a few days, at least. She is doing wonderfully well as it is, with a pulse calm and even as mine. I wish I was as contented with Miss Ashton's appearance. Those dark shadows under her eyes trouble me."

"How can she even rest, with all this new anxiety, this added burden of care?"

"She must be entirely relieved from them at any

cost. Surely you must see yourself how frail she is !”

“Do you think I do not ?” groaned Frank despondently ; “but what can I do ?”

“Take her away from them at once ; fill her life and soul so full of joy and tender ministering, that she may utterly rest, in every sense of the word,” returned Dr. Ronald energetically.

Frank started passionately to his feet, so pale, with such an anguished expression, that Dr. Ronald silently took his arm and led him out into the open air, directing their steps to a rustic seat under some trees quite near at hand, still not speaking until they had reached this shaded retreat. Then, with his hand on his friend’s shoulder, he said earnestly,

“Tell me now, Hilton, what all this means ; and do not think me a brute for speaking so cruelly.”

“You scarcely can know how bitterly cruel it was !” cried Frank, with fierce excitement. “If my love had met with an ordinary disappointment, I hope I could have borne it calmly and patiently ; but to see that delicate, sensitive girl suffering, almost dying, before my very eyes, and to know it is my own act, my own will, which separates us ; to feel even that she would not have refused my love,

that my care could really save her; and then—my God, it is terribly hard!"

"But why is it? What obstacle can successfully oppose your own will, so favored by circumstances as well as by Miss Ashton's regard?"

"Only—my own pledged word—my 'honor'!" with a bitter sarcastic laugh, which pained his hearer more deeply than even his words had power to do.

Then, with sudden impulsiveness, Frank poured vehemently forth all the sad story of his early entanglement with Agnes Headley; not sparing his own weak folly in becoming so influenced, yet speaking with tender reverence still of the young girl through whose means the mother's unscrupulous hands had forged the fetters he could not now shake off. As he ended the revelation of this painful story, Dr. Ronald, after an instant's pause, said solemnly,

"A very singular affair, truly. That you are sadly hampered seems unmistakable; and yet—I fancy I have heard of these Headleys before. Where do they come from?"

"I have not much idea," replied Frank carelessly. "I do not think I ever heard."

"Do you know his first name—Captain Headley's?"

"I have some idea that it is Robert; and yet it is a very vague notion."

"Humph! a retired navy officer—Robert Headley. Whom did he marry?"

"Her name must have been Graham, I suppose. I met a brother of hers—"

"No; I mean the first wife—Agnes' mother?"

"That I never knew."

"Had the girl no middle name, which might have been her mother's?"

"Let me see—yes. It was Lawton, I think."

"Exactly! She must have been Agnes Lawton, then. It is really very curious;" and Dr. Ronald seemed to fall into deep musing.

"But why do you ask all this?" cried Frank impatiently. "Of what importance can the maiden name of Agnes' mother be?"

"Possibly of none," replied Dr. Ronald tranquilly; "only I was wondering if it was the same family."

"And is it?"

"It seems quite likely. However," rousing himself as he spoke from his dreamy thoughtfulness, "do you really feel, Hilton, that this childish engagement, after all these years of utter silence and separation, has any force now?"

"Dare I think otherwise?" he asked gloomily.

"Why not? If this girl really lived, and yet left you all this time to believe her dead, how can she make any shadow of claim upon you?"

"It is enough that she makes it. I would accept my freedom only too gladly if she would offer it; but I can never ask it."

"But you have only that old harridan's word that you are expected to fulfill the pledge."

"Still, I must hold myself in readiness for Agnes' own demand. Remember how cruelly I seemed to treat her, in that unwitting burst of anger;—can I ever make amends for all she has suffered?"

"But why do you imagine anything so unlikely? If she could bear to leave you so completely these ten years, rest assured she has consoled herself by this time."

"That might be were she free to follow her own will; but Mrs. Headley utterly controlled her feeble will always."

"And you will not, then, just end the whole complication and disavow this pretended obligation—not even for Miss Ashton's sake?"

"Hush, Ronald! how can you torture me so?" cried Frank bitterly. "Have I not told you how Miss Ashton herself bids me keep my word?"

"How could she do otherwise?" very dryly returned Dr. Ronald. "Would you expect a sensi-

tive, refined girl like Miss Ashton to offer to persuade you on such a subject?"

• "But what then—"

"If you had been wise, you would have ignored Mrs. Headley's scheming letter, and just have married Miss Ashton quietly, without all this fuss."

"Are you serious, Ronald, in saying this?" asked Frank, with surprise and reproof in his tones.

"Why not? Had you been married before you got the letter, what could you have done?"

"Nothing then, of course. But surely you have a keener sense of honor than to say this deliberately?"

"Oh, 'honor'!—honor is a charming thing!" exclaimed Dr. Ronald, almost roughly. "When a man is bound by his word to one woman, and by a mutual love to another, on which side does the 'honor' come in?"

"Ronald, this is positively brutal!" cried Frank, roused to intense anger now.

"Brutal!" repeated Dr. Ronald, with flashing eyes. "Dare you so stigmatize the mere words which only too truly describe the position into which you have blundered! What words, then, are severe enough to apply to you for inflicting such suffering on that innocent girl?"

"You believe she suffers?" murmured Frank, all his anger quenched by this bitter thought.

"Can you not see it, man? A girl of her keen spirit does not moan and cry over her grief; her heart breaks silently, while her lips are still smiling, her brow serene."

"This is awfully cruel, Ronald," gasped Frank, looking so ghastly that Dr. Ronald could not endure to prolong the scene.

"I do not mean to be cruel, Hilton," he said, gravely yet kindly. "I only want to make you see clearly what you ought to do. Of these conflicting duties, surely the highest, the strongest, the most imperative, is that which places Miss Ashton's love and life forever in your care. Agnes Headley can live without you—probably is very well content to do so: Miss Ashton cannot."

"You believe she would die—" faintly asked Frank in horror-stricken tones.

"Not quite of love alone," with a half-smile; "but her fragile physique is too nearly exhausted already to bear the least additional strain. Your love and care will save her; nothing else could."

"And I must break my word—" with regret, mingled oddly with a wistful, half-hopeful look of eagerness.

"Not quite yet, dear fellow. Let me first try

a little experiment with the Headleys : you know I am fond of experiments ; where are they to be found ?”

“ I can hardly tell : they were at Windsor yesterday.”

“ O, I can easily trace them, then, if they are not still there.”

“ But what will you—”

“ Never mind what. I can scheme as well as Mrs. Headley ; and I want a little amusement just now.”

“ And I ?”

“ O, you must take care of them all here, for a few days, till Mrs. Ashton can be moved to Arlington House again. You may even make love, moderately, to Miss Ashton.”

“ Hush !” he interrupted, almost sternly, as these words stirred his pulses with a tremor he dared not permit lest his passion should gain a mastery which he might never again bring under subjection. But he could not conceal from his friend’s keen observation the flush which rose to his brow, the glad light which came to his eyes ; and Dr. Ronald seeing it, vowed a mighty vow to himself, that the tangled skein of their fate should be unraveled and smoothed were it in the power of his strong will and persistent courage to accomplish it. He only said lightly, however,

"I mean it, Hilton, in all seriousness. Some means must be found to break or unloose these fetters of yours; and I think I would tear your release from that woman's very throat before I would give it up."

He spoke with sudden, strong passion, which transformed his well-marked features, usually so grave, almost to moroseness, so that Frank looked at him in wonder as he said earnestly,

"I need not tell you what your success would be to me, Ronald: even the attempt has my warmest gratitude."

"Don't talk of attempts, Hilton," he answered impatiently. "I shall compel success, one way or another. Be sure of that."

"It will be a fearful suspense."

"It need not be. Remember, that sweet girl must not come any nearer the dizzy verge, which she is too perilously close to now. You must let all your selfish prudence go, and think only of making her happy."

"If I were only sure—"

"Sure that you can? Upon my soul, if you hesitate one moment longer I will win her myself."

"You believe you could?" with a gleam of triumph mingled with the deep tenderness of his tones.

"Don't defy me. I have a convenient fashion of always doing whatever I undertake."

"Succeed in this present venture," cried Frank, with strong earnestness, "and I will bless you forever."

"No doubt you will, for a while at least," replied Dr. Ronald, with a mocking grimace, as they returned to the cottage, where Rose stood by the low-silled window, languidly watching their approach.

"Well, Miss Ashton," began Dr. Ronald abruptly, "I wish you had not such a horror for surgery as you professed last night."

"Why?—do you want to give me another lesson?"

"Exactly. I am in a hurry to go back to the city; and here is Hilton needing to have his wound dressed."

"Indeed!" cried Frank, with indignant reproachfulness. "I am quite able to do that myself. How can you ask Miss Ashton such a thing?"

"Well, really—" began Dr. Ronald dryly; but Rose interrupted him eagerly,

"You were quite right, Dr. Ronald. Of course I can do so simple a thing as that. Never mind Mr. Hilton's perversity; but just tell me what to do."

"But it is not necessary," persisted Frank uneasily.

"It will amuse me," replied Rose composedly.

"Poor Hilton!" laughed Dr. Ronald gruffly; "if she means to make an amusement of it, I pity you indeed. At the same time, Miss Ashton, I will give you your instructions in sober earnest."

And explaining in a few words what was to be done, he disappeared hastily in the inner room to make a last examination of Mrs. Ashton's arm, and assure himself that all there was going on well.

"Do you really mind my doing this?" asked Rose, with a shy flush, as she approached Frank with a curious hesitation, seeming almost to expect actual resistance.

His recent discussion with Dr. Ronald had so unnerved him—so shaken his strong resolution with the sweet, insidious flattery of new-born hope—that he would have been more than human could he have withstood her timid, pleading glance. Barely controlling the emotion which rose in great waves within him, Frank took her uplifted hands softly but ardently within his own, which thrilled deliciously at her touch, and bent over them with a lowly reverence, as he passionately pressed repeated kisses upon them.

Startled, almost frightened, at his impetuous tenderness, Rose drew back, flushing and trembling, while faintly essaying to release her hands from his grasp.

As he saw her alarm and timidity, Frank, in quick self-reproach, whispered entreatingly,

“Forgive me, Rose? I could not help it.”

She tried to look the reproof she could not induce her trembling lips to utter; but signally failed, as a lovely smile beamed from her half-averted eyes, and flashed like a gleam of brightness over her face. Then, conscious of all that this betrayed, she turned from him in quick confusion again, and this so staggered his newly-formed resolves that he could only take refuge in utter, delicious silence, not daring to speak while that perilous fascination overpowered him.

Some moments passed; and those two hearts seemed to be looking far down into each other's depths, reading, with serene yet glowing delight the sweet mystery of love so faithfully graven there forever.

Then, with a long, deep sigh, Rose said softly and tremulously, as she vainly strove to lift her abashed eyes towards his in timid entreaty,

“Do not refuse me this little favor?”

“It will not pain you?” he asked, hesitating.

"O, no! there is so little to do."

And indeed her little fingers so deftly and readily accomplished their task that he scarcely felt their dainty touch, and could almost have implored its continuance.

When Dr. Ronald came out again he carefully examined Rose's performance, as though it had been an intricate and difficult operation, rather than the simple thing it was.

"Very well, indeed, Miss Ashton," he pronounced. "Your proficiency is astonishing. If you could only teach your patient to be more composed—to endure—"

"Composed?" she asked, in genuine astonishment. "I assure you he was very quiet."

"Observe his pulse," with imperturbable gravity, taking her half-reluctant fingers and letting them rest on Frank's wrist; "do you not see how disturbed and irregular it is?"

"Nonsense!" cried Frank with a flush of almost annoyance, while Rose colored deeply also, she scarce knew why.

"It is very unprofessional, Hilton," with serious reproof, though his eyes gleamed curiously, "very wrong, to disregard the indications of the pulse. I shall hope to find improvement to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE next two days passed pleasantly enough, yet so curious were they in every detail, so deliciously flavored with the piquant sauce of novelty, that none of the party ever quite forgot them. To Frank and Rose they were like a glimpse of fairy-land—a trip to Arcadia itself—with their perfect simplicity, their ideal enjoyments. Almost unconsciously they yielded to the dream-like spell which inwrought every sense, fascinated beyond all thought of danger, all care for the future, by its unconscious force. Not quite convinced by Dr. Ronald's arguments, not quite persuaded by his strong urging, Frank was still insensibly influenced by them to relax much of the sleepless, untiring vigilance with which he had so carefully preserved the integrity of his purpose. It needed but the smallest concession to the force of his passionate love, so hardly restrained hitherto, to insure its breaking now beyond all bounds; and while still refraining from actual words, which might too rudely startle Rose's timid, retiring delicacy, he no longer denied himself long hours of her dear pres-

ence, giving himself up to an entire abandonment of all restraints upon his own ardent feelings, save those whose absence would have too clearly betrayed him. That he loved her, Rose felt to the remotest recesses of her trembling, enraptured heart ; yet in utmost purity and with simple trust in his perfect integrity she feared not to give to his hardly tried devotion these brief days of joy, after which she cared but little what might follow. In her sweet simplicity she saw no wrong to the hapless Agnes, whom she pitied rather than envied for the fate before her, in thus accepting this fleeting happiness, so divinely bright, so sure to fade into utter nothingness. Whatever of dreary blackness her life must yet contain, she believed she could bear all patiently, living only on this joyous memory. She could say in her inmost heart,

“ To-morrow let my sun his beams display,
Or in clouds hide them. I have lived, to-day!”

Thus, almost hand in hand, they wandered through the primitive forest, gathering little treasures in its unexplored depths, fragile, delicate wild-flowers, graceful fairy-like ferns, odd little fragments of every variety, which they guarded jealously as sacred relics, for future contemplation, of *this* their day of divine, pure happiness.


But as the second evening closed around them, and they listened with secret regret to Mrs. Ashton's expressions of delight that they were to return to Arlington House on the following day, a faint misgiving stole upon Rose's consciousness that life was not easily to be taken up again where it had been so abruptly broken off; that these hours of sweet trifling were not a very wise preparation for the bitter self-abnegation of the future. The day might come on which she had dreamily counted, when their loved memory would be the one solitary joy of her bereaved life; but before that must come a mighty struggle—a great wave of anguish must roll over her very soul—before she should reach the dreary strand where, forever alone, she could learn to exist, and be not altogether unhappy, while those cherished recollections remained.

To Frank a sensation of almost remorse had come. Even those few bright hours had brought such a glow of fresh life and animation to Rose's face, that he keenly felt how cruel was this glimpse of joy which his own hand must condemn them both to surrender. How much harder to both it seemed to go back now to the constrained, guarded existence which must so soon be followed by the great blank of separation! For in his calmer mo-

ments he had never deliberately contemplated or consented to any open breach of his pledged word. Agnes should have the fulfillment of his bond if she claimed it; and his heart sank heavily as he felt how much harder it would be to live out a dreary, loveless life, so bound, than even to fade gently away into the painless repose of death, as Rose might hope to do.

Sad and bitter were these thoughts, while Rose's pensiveness was also depressing him. The thought of the coming day, with its possible developments and responsibilities, its certain privation of the intoxicating bliss so briefly his, so quickly snatched away, weighed heavily upon him.

They were sitting together in the simple little room, which looked so bright and pretty now with the trifling added comforts they had gathered around them, and the giving of which to the warm-hearted goodwife who had so generously received these unwonted inmates had been a genuine delight to their own hearts, so gratefully, and with such admiring wonder did she accept them. The shaded lamp cast a softened light over the whole strange scene; just rendering each object sufficiently distinct; yet not effacing the wild picturesqueness of the view from the window, *which* was thrown open to admit the air. The



dying daylight still faintly displayed the shadowy outlines of the masses of forest trees, irregularly grouped on all sides, while the delicate scent of the wild roses and fragrant woodbine which shaded the rude porch, giving it a grace of its own, crept gently in upon the dewy air with a delicious, subdued sweetness.

To Rose it seemed almost a sacrilege to speak ; and as she pensively seemed to study the landscape before her, yet with busy, widely wandering thoughts, she nervously started, as Mrs. Ashton said petulantly,

“Are you all asleep? How dreadfully weary you look, Rose!”

“Do I?” with a little languor of regret in her voice, which Frank felt with a new pain.

“Are you really so tired?” he asked wistfully, with a tender longing he scarce knew how to repress to soothe all her weariness with loving caresses.

“O, no !” she returned, rousing herself now from her abstractedness. “I was only thinking—”

“‘Thinking’ !” repeated Harry, laughing good-humoredly ; “what a much-abused occupation ! How many idle, worthless moments are passed in an utter unprofitableness which is dignified by the name of ‘thinking’ ! Do you comprehend, my idle

Rose, what a highly intellectual employment of one's faculties that is meant to be?"

"You absurd Harry!" she answered, quite merrily now. "You are enough to frighten one into silence, indeed, with such ponderous definitions."

"I do believe, Rose," said Mrs. Ashton, "that you are half-regretting this little rustic paradise which has so charmed you."

"And why not?" she asked, a little sadly. "Our thoughts and words and deeds here must surely have been pure and innocent, away from all the distractions of the world. Can we often say that much of any two days in our lives?"

"We ought to," observed Frank; "but it is true that temptation and opportunity make a vast difference in the record of our lives. Yet this little breathing-space is not without its benefit."

"It has been like a bright oasis in the great desert of the world," murmured Rose absently. "If one could only forget the duties of life and live always such days as these!"

"You would soon weary of it," interrupted Harry. "The exquisite charm this rural simplicity exerts is more from the force of contrast than its own real attraction."

"Do you believe this worthy couple, who belong

here, and have never known anything different, ever wish for change or variety?"

"Perhaps not; but that is only because they do not know of any other life."

"Of course," interposed Mrs. Ashton, with placid satisfaction. "Imagine, Rose, how you would pine after a while for an opera, or a concert, or even a quiet little reception. This is all very well for a while; but after all, the world was meant for us to live in. If we all fly to the wilderness, what becomes of its charm?"

"O, Rose would then retreat to the cities, and people their vast solitudes with busy memories and fond dreams, as she does here now," said Harry, in good-humored raillery.

"Well," said Frank quietly, "the sum and substance of it all is that we go back to Arlington House to-morrow, rested and refreshed; ready to begin again the busy life we left so unexpectedly behind us three days ago."

"And what a sensation we shall make!" observed Mrs. Ashton, in amused tones. "They ought to come out and meet us, with great rejoicing. Think of all we have given them to talk about!"

"To be sure," added Harry; "even the Morton-Maynard engagement will sink into obscurity beside the thrilling narrative of our bruises and hair-

breadth escapes. They will not forgive us for eclipsing them."

"But Mrs. Wayland will," observed Frank, with a little harmless malice. "It will be a godsend to her, if it helps her and others to forget that unlucky failure of hers."

"Are you not a little unfair towards Mrs. Wayland?" asked Rose, with gentle reproach.

"Am I?" he asked penitently. "Perhaps I have too little patience with that detestable flirting, which seems to me the bane of so many lives."

"I do not think Mrs. Wayland meant to flirt with Mr. Maynard," returned Rose diffidently. "It always seemed to me she really cared for him."

"She did in the end, evidently; and yet how desperately, only a few days ago, she was flirting with Robert Headley!"

"But that," said Harry, "was only to disguise her pain when Maynard was devoting himself to the pretty sister."

"Well, I am sorry for Mrs. Wayland, whoever was the greatest fault," observed Mrs. Ashton. "She was cruelly disappointed, and in a very heartless manner. Mr. Maynard did not deserve a happiness based on such conduct."

With sudden restlessness Rose left her seat and went over to the porch, where she stood idly twist-

ing a spray of the woodbine round her fingers, as she fell into a deep fit of musing.

"Of what are you thinking so deeply?" asked Frank, coming to her side.

"Of Mrs. Wayland. It seems to me so hard that the highest and purest source of all happiness should be so trifled with by these idlers, to whom nothing is sacred."

"You are right," he answered, almost sternly. "They play with human hearts, never heeding the cruel damage they do. Can we wonder if sometimes a well-merited retribution is visited upon them?"

"Poor little woman!" murmured Rose half-audibly.

"And yet," ventured Frank, with some hesitation, "I could almost pity Maynard too. Must it not be a bitter pain to him to discover the unintended mischief he has done?"

"Do you think he cares?" with a little contempt in her tones.

"I know he does; he is very penitent, very much ashamed of it."

"I had not given him credit for so much grace. It is a cowardly thing to win a woman's love just for a moment's pastime."

She spoke so bitterly, that Frank felt a sharp

pang, as it seemed she might almost so accuse him. Passionately he bent over her, saying, with pained accents that she wondered at as she detected them,

"Rose, you do not—you could not feel—that, had I suspected my cruel bondage—"

"Hush!" she cried softly, while a burning flush covered all her face. "How can you pain me with such an unworthy thought?"

"Forgive me! It was unworthy of your goodness, at least," he answered fervently. "Can you imagine, Rose, how precious to me is your divine trust?"

"Let me say now," she returned, in low, firm tones, yet with an effort he did not suspect, "one thing I have often desired to say. In the days to come, whatever may happen, remember, I have ever trusted you entirely."

He could only take her hand in silent gratitude, not daring to say one word.

CHAPTER XXX.

A ROOMY, comfortable carriage had been procured, and arranged especially in reference to Mrs. Ashton's needs. With masses of cushions so disposed that she could sit up or recline at will, and with Harry at her side, watchful of every look, ready to detect the least token of weariness or discomfort, there was little doubt of her reaching Arlington House without either pain or exhaustion.


The injuries sustained by Frank and Rose were fast healing, and presented an interesting rather than a disfiguring appearance now, with all swelling and discoloration removed, and only dainty strips of black court-plaster to mark the cut on Frank's temple and the longer, more jagged wound on Rose's arm.

They started as early as possible in the morning, to avoid the extreme heat of midday—hoping even to reach their destination within a few hours, if they found Mrs. Ashton could bear to drive so rapidly and continuously. It was a scene of wonderful beauty, on which they looked with regretful

eyes, as they paused silently, at the outset, to take one last lingering view. The deep shadows on the mountain-side, within whose dark recesses the early rays of the sun had not yet penetrated, looked cool and refreshing, as contrasted with the more prominent rocks and trees, which stood out, bathed in a flood of glorious light ; while the birds still sang their morning hymns, and the dew-drops glistened on the grass, yielding up their existence, as the sun's ardor found them out and drank up all their freshness.

As they carefully put the carriage in motion, close watchfulness was needed to avoid as well as they could the roughnesses of the road during the first few miles till they should again reach the smoother, more frequented route, over which they might proceed more rapidly.

With all their caution, however, Mrs. Ashton soon become too much shaken and exhausted to bear the motion of the carriage so continuously. It was still comparatively early in the day when they rested beneath some shady, wide-spreading trees. Here Mrs. Ashton could lie contentedly and slumber lightly, with the faithful Harry still closely guarding her. While she took this needful rest, Frank ventured to petition Rose for one more ramble in the wild woods around them, whose



dense coolness they might never again feel, or behold its primitive charm.

They wandered idly, almost aimlessly, through many of the shaded glens and picturesque retreats with which the forest everywhere abounded : now sitting down on some moss-covered rock, listening to the babble of a little mountain-stream as it coursed merrily along ; or scrambling over more precipitous banks, where not often before, if ever, a human foot had trod. They returned at length, with slow reluctance, from this last glimpse of the fairy-land which had become so inexpressibly dear to both ; having scarcely awakened its sweet echoes with one sound of even low-toned voices, or profaned its sweet purity with one thought of human passion.

As they stood still, for one last farewell glance over it all, before rejoining the others, who were beginning to look round impatiently for them, the glad, serene light which had cast such a glow over Rose's face faded quite away, leaving her so pale, with such deeply shadowed eyes, that Frank exclaimed with quick alarm,

"Are you so tired, Rose ? Have we gone too far for your strength ?"

"No," she said pensively. "It is not that ; but

I have enjoyed these days so much—and it seems so sad to think they are over forever.”

“Yes, that is the cruelty of it,” he replied, catching the infection of her depression for an instant. “I would almost give up such bright moments for the pain of losing them.”

“But is not their memory always beautiful and satisfying?” she asked gently, with more animation, regretting the careless words which had so troubled him.

“Memory ! memory !” he murmured restlessly, “all my memories, so far, are only bitterly sad !”

“But now?” she returned, with pleading sweetness, “if we should never meet again in this world, will not this little bright episode in our lives be a sweet, fragrant memory to you, as to me.”

“Will it be so to you?” looking eagerly upon her earnest, upturned face. “Will there be no bitterness—no reproach ?”

“Never : it will be as the recollection of one long, beautiful dream, never to be forgotten, much less regretted,” she added softly.

“It will be full of undying regret to me forever !” he cried passionately.

“It ought not,” she replied steadily. “What have we done or thought of evil that we should have any lasting regrets ?”

Her face so glowed with the pure, sweet enthusiasm of her words, that Frank, while tenderly watching the animation which so charmed him, could answer in renewed strength and patience.

"You shame me, Rose, with your exalted courage. You are right. Could our lives only be always,—as they ought to be, but so seldom are,—'one pure sweet song,' how rapturous would be all our memories!"

"At least we can always approach such perfection," she replied gently, "and our shortcomings then we may dare to forget."

"Rose," he began eagerly; then paused to add in a different tone, "I have never asked if I might sometimes call you 'Rose;' and yet I cannot always say 'Miss Ashton.'"

With a faint blush, she said, as they again bent their steps towards Mrs. Ashton's resting-place,

"There are so few in the world who call me 'Rose,'—only Harry and Clare, I think,—that it is pleasant to have you do so too."

"Then I may still?" he said eagerly and with evident pleasure,

"If you wish it," she answered softly; and Harry now called out impatiently,

"Come, Rose! You insisted we should bring luncheon with us, and it would be awfully stupid

to carry it all to Arlington House. Suppose you give it to us now, and then we will start again."

"Of course you are not hungry," she replied, smiling archly, as she aided Frank to hunt up the light refreshments which they had brought, and had stowed away in the carriage so carefully that they were not readily found.

Before many minutes more had passed, while the sun was still high in the heavens, although the afternoon sea-breeze already faintly reached them with its fragrant saltness, they were again in motion; and with a smoother road, and Mrs. Ashton's renewed strength after her rest, they could now drive more rapidly. Thus, in good time to dress for dinner, they arrived at Arlington House, where all the guests were so absorbed in that interesting occupation, that they could without delay or interruption take refuge in their own rooms.

The customary gathering on the piazza, or in the parlors, for a few minutes before dinner, enabled them to encounter at once the varied greetings and exclamations with which they were received; and which they rather enjoyed, knowing that Mrs. Ashton was safe from the excitement of it, in her enforced seclusion up-stairs. Bright and unwearied as she seemed, they had insisted on her not attempting to come down to dinner for some

days at least ; and she had yielded to their entreaties, the more readily that she shrank from curious observation at the table in particular, where her broken arm could not fail to attract notice.

Harry was quite condoled with for having no wounds or bruises to show ; while Frank and Rose were fain to laugh heartily at the admiration lavished so absurdly on their trophies of the fray, which seemed to be regarded as so highly ornamental, and viewed with genuine regret.

"Really," cried Frank, in irrepressible amusement, "if we could possibly have looked for such an ovation, I am sure Miss Ashton and myself would gladly have left a few fingers, or even limbs, on the field of battle !"

"How can you talk so absurdly, Mr. Hilton !" retorted Mrs. Bradford, herself smiling, as she took in the situation with keen enjoyment.

"Well," he answered, with feigned reproach, "you might at least be grateful to us for supplying you all with such an interesting topic for discussion. You would almost have stagnated these three days—"

"Indeed, no," she returned eagerly ; "we have had some minor excitements of our own here, which have kept us from quite falling into a comatose condition."

"You don't say so!" cried Harry curiously. "What has cast even a ripple over the smooth surface of existence here?"

"First, we have had an engagement—"

"What, another? This is really alarming!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'another.' I have heard only of this one—Miss Morton—"

"O, that is an old story. We heard of it long ago."

"Indeed?" with assumed petulance; "perhaps you have heard all about Mrs. Wayland too."

"Mrs. Wayland! No—at least nothing very startling. What has she been doing?"

"Only taking an abrupt departure the second day after you went away."

"Ah!" said Harry quietly, not caring to ask any questions about an event he fancied he understood only too well.

But Mrs. Bradford, surprised at his apparent indifference, presently added,

"It was curious that she hastily packed up, and quite unceremoniously left us, immediately after the intelligence of your accident was received. We wondered if there could be any connection between the two events; and yet she certainly did not go in your direction. You have seen nothing of her?"

"We have not even thought of such a thing," replied Harry, rather puzzled at this singular statement. "What could possibly make you imagine anything so extraordinary?"

"Only the coincidence, and her very evident agitation on hearing of it. We wondered a little," in lower tones now, and with an amused air, "whether Mr. Hilton had been smiling on the coquettish little widow, so that her heart was breaking over the disaster."

"How absurd!" replied Harry a little indignantly. "He scarcely ever spoke to her even at the table; so that I used to fancy he had taken a dislike to her."

"Well, it may have been her capricious fancy was fascinated by his very reserve and unapproachableness," returned Mrs. Bradford, turning away indifferently to speak to Mr. Morton.

A moment's reflection served to suggest to Harry the probably true interpretation of Mrs. Wayland's apparently odd freak. She must have been watching, in wild, scarcely concealed impatience, for some excuse to leave the house which would prevent her departure being at all associated in any one's mind with the announcement of Fred Maynard's engagement. The intense torture she must be enduring in receiving this cruel blow, so

utterly without preparation or warning, was the harder to bear because to her light, volatile nature, caprices did not readily deepen into serious attachments ; and her ill-regulated and undisciplined feelings knew not how to submit to the unwonted restraints she sought now to impose.

Pondering thoughtfully over all this, as he followed the stream into the dining-room when the dinner-bell sounded, Harry was faintly amused to see how Fred Maynard had contrived to persuade the Mortons to take advantage of some new vacancies at the table, and to change their places, so that Miss Carrie Morton now occupied that next him, which for so long had been Mrs. Wayland's.

With a certain sadness as he thought regretfully of the little widow's bright, pretty ways, her amusing though frivolous speeches, and pictured her to himself as now wandering elsewhere, lone and desolate, Harry's generous heart made him respond somewhat indignantly to Fred Maynard's careless suggestion of his triumph in securing his present neighbor.

“Miss Morton is a charming *vis-à-vis*,” he said courteously ; “still I miss Mrs. Wayland's pleasant laugh and lively conversation.”

His manner, even more than his words, was so significant, that Fred Maynard flushed scarlet and

turned away in silent confusion, while Rose looked almost reproachfully at her brother in her surprise at his severity.

"I could not help it," he whispered, somewhat apologetically. "It looked so confoundedly heartless in the fellow to be so openly parading the happiness which is based on such a treachery."

"Don't say that, Harry," she pleaded earnestly. "You know he did not mean to deceive her."

"She does not the less suffer," he retorted irritably.

"No; but I think she cared enough for him to prefer even her own suffering to his being reproached with it."

"Possibly. Women have such a singular fondness for self-immolation."

"Well, then, let her have the consolation which suits her womanhood, however you may despise it. For her sake, spare the recreant lover."

"Rose, you are a curious girl," with recovered serenity, and looking questioningly at her. "Why should you defend that good-looking delinquent?"

"Only because there is no one else to do it," she answered, laughing softly at his bewilderment.

"What is all this?" asked Frank, wondering at their subdued discussion.

"Rose is scolding, as usual," replied Harry demurely.

"But I have not had my share?" said Frank, looking at her with assumed reproach.

"We were speaking of Mrs. Wayland," she answered coolly. Does your conscience suggest any scolding on her account, as due to your demerits?"

"I think not. But why should Harry—"

"Just because he chose to take a perverse view of things?" she replied willfully.

Their further continuance of these side-remarks was prevented by a question from Fred Maynard; and in answering it, conversation became more general.

CHAPTER XXXI.

As they left the dinner-table a letter was placed in Frank's hand, which he held for some moments carelessly, while he walked on by Rose's side, letting it remain unopened, till they reached their rooms, when he said a little weariedly, as Harry asked him to come with them,

"Later, I will be glad to come ; but now I have this letter to read, and then must have a cigar."

"To be sure," said his friend, laughing good-humoredly. "After three days' privation you must be wild for a smoke."

"My nerves want a little steadying," he replied, as he left them and entered his own room.

Lighting first the cigar he did especially crave, as a restful stimulant after so much excitement, he sat down by the open window, looking vaguely out upon the bay, not really seeing the sparkling waters or the busy vessels which floated so lightly there, while his thoughts took a sad, regretful tone as he recalled all those sweet hours so quickly past.

"Gone forever," he murmured, with regretful, passionate longing. "O my sweet, sweet Rose! what will be the end of all this? Or has it come already?"

He rose, impetuously pacing the room with wild, disordered steps for some moments. Then throwing himself again in his chair, with a deep sigh he rested his brow on his hand, and gave himself up to deep, anxious thought.

Then, with another long-drawn sigh, he took up the neglected letter, gazing vacantly at the address in idle speculation as to its writer, not recognizing any well-known hand, yet having a faint idea he had somewhere seen that peculiarly clear, bold writing. Breaking the seal at length, he started, and awoke into something more like life as he saw Dr. Ronald's signature. He read a few words, and then let the hand which held the letter fall carelessly by his side, as he muttered impatiently,

"Of what use could it be? And yet I did faintly hope, after all."

Taking up the letter again resolutely, after a moment he began to read it more deliberately.

"Have you wondered, my dear Hilton," it began, "whether I ever gave a second thought to hunting up the Headleys, as I promised to do? I fully

meant to do it without delay ; but an interesting and very complicated case has been so entirely absorbing every moment and requiring all my energy, that I really did forget you in its care. To-day, however, I have given all my time and thoughts to you. The task I had set before me was a very simple one in itself. The Agnes Lawton whom I supposed to be Captain Headley's first wife was a far-away cousin of mine ; and not long ago a little inheritance came into my hands for her, which I have had in charge ever since, while the lawyers have been trying to discover what had become of her. There seemed every reason to believe she had died, as the only Captain Robert Headley we could hear of was married to a Miss Graham : still no one who knew them had heard of a previous marriage. So, while we were trying to trace them through a very desultory tour abroad, we were also looking for some other Captain Headley ; but thus far without success in either quest. This morning I ran down to Windsor, only to find the birds had flown to another perch ; and following them as rapidly as steam could carry me, I caught up with them at Springfield. Here, after resting and dining at the hotel (you will forgive me, I hope, for waiting to attend to such prosaic matters), I sent my card

to Captain Headley's room, and, as I expected, was received by the full conclave. I needed but to ask a few questions to ascertain I had indeed found the man I had been so long looking for. Stating then the nature of my business, but vaguely and cautiously, it was met with quite a little chorus of exclamations, loudest and most pathetic of all being Mrs. Headley's voice (what a confounded hypocrite she appears to be, by the bye !) as she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and talked about 'poor dear Agnes !' 'how sad !' and 'how wonderful !' till I really felt bewildered as to her intended meaning. But it was all clear enough after a while. Take comfort and courage, dear old fellow ! Your Agnes—of whom even the timid, miserable old father spoke with unfeigned regret and tenderness—died indeed, for all they know to the contrary, on that dark night, when that scheming woman broke her heart with the discovery of the cruel deceit which had been practiced on her."

The letter fell fluttering to the floor, as Frank pale to the very lips, sank back in his chair, with closed eyes, whence some bitter tears slowly fell as his trembling lips uttered faintly, with vague incoherency,

"Oh, my God !—poor Agnes !—my sweet Rose !"

His joy seemed more like grief, as he sat there with bowed head resting on his clasped hands, dazed, bewildered, shuddering with strongly conflicting emotions, as all the fierce anguish, the long, long regret, the passionate love, which had successively rent his heart and left it aching, seemed now to gather all their forces in one last contest for supremacy.

Raising his head at last, with a light of patient joy shining in the tear-dimmed eyes, of whose unwonted moisture his manhood had no cause to be ashamed, Frank addressed himself to finish the perusal of his friend's letter.

There were only these few more lines to read:

"They were so eager to claim the inheritance for Captain Headley, that they voluntarily offered a written and sworn statement, giving an account of Agnes' death, as they insisted on calling her disappearance. First securing this paper, which seems full and complete in every particular, I told them it would rest with the lawyers to decide whether further corroborating evidence would be needed. This they claimed could be easily obtained from the officers of the steamer, whom they would undertake to find if necessary. I then left them, followed to the very door by that wily woman (who strikes me as a very uncomfortable sort of mother-


in-law). I managed not to shake hands with her, for which I felt a particular aversion ; and cutting short all her plausible speeches, her friendly protestations on the plea of being late for my train, I escaped her clutches, I hope forever. I dare not quite congratulate you, Hilton, where so sad a death gives you your coveted freedom ; but you know well how cordially you have always my best wishes.

“ I will run down to see you all in a day or two.

“ Faithfully yours,

“ GEORGE RONALD.”

Frank rose and paced his room, trying to control his deep agitation, to steady his quivering nerves, and to school his wild impatience into some degree of restraint. The thought, however, of going calmly to the Ashtons' apartments, and endeavoring to spend the rest of the evening quietly there, giving no sign of the turmoil within, uttering no word of the passionate longing which shook his very soul, could not be entertained for a moment. Neither was he content to leave Rose all these hours, watching with sweet, patient wistfulness for the coming he had promised, or to deny himself the joy of being with her, now that no shadow of the past or cruel reality of the present stood between them. Desperately studying out all this, he



took at last a bold resolve. Hastily rearranging the slight disarray of his dress, he wrote a few lines to Rose, entreating her to come down to the piazza for a while, and sent it to her room. Then he stood eagerly watching at the foot of the stairs for the gentle, fairy-like tread he knew so well.

As she flitted lightly down the steps, and saw him standing there, very pale and stern in his endeavor to control his intense agitation, Rose paused, shrinking a little nervously as she clasped her hands, saying in an anxious tone,

“What has happened? What new trouble—”

“It is neither grief nor trouble, sweet Rose,” he answered in low, unsteady tones, as he took her hand and led her by the side door out upon the broad piazza, now nearly deserted again.

His words and tones, as well as the tender clasp in which he still held her hand, reassured her, but did not remove her vague sense of some coming fate she half dreaded to meet. Still silent and passive, she let him draw her hand through his arm, and lead her down the steps towards the dense masses of shrubbery which screened the little arbor where they had so often lingered over many sweet hours. As he drew her within the entrance, still in that strange silence, her heart, oppressed

with a thousand nameless fears, seemed almost to cease beating, as she cried with sudden pained excitement,

"Do you know you are terrifying me!—what is this—?"

"Forgive me, Rose," he whispered passionately. "I have not known how to speak—how to express this great joy!"

"Is it joy?" she asked, trembling violently now. "O, tell me, what joy?"

"One that grows from the very shadow of a grave," he answered reverently; adding softly, "Agnes' grave."

With a faint cry Rose snatched her hand from his clasp, scarcely conscious of what she did, as she hid her face, even in that friendly darkness, that he might not see the deep flush which suffused it, while her gently falling tears wet her cheeks.

Frank waited one brief moment, and then his glad impatient love burst all bounds, and he bent tenderly over her, whispering tenderly as he tried to take her hands in his.

"Need I pretend to grieve, Rose, over the certainty of the death which gives me freedom again? O, Rose! are words needed now between us? Have you not known all this time how I have loved you?"

Feeling how he craved one word or look from her timid, long-silent love, Rose made one brave effort to speak : but her sweet trembling lips vainly essayed the utterance she sought ; she could not find voice : and Frank, gathering her closely within his arms, drew her head in contented yielding to his breast, as he pressed his lips in one long, tender kiss upon hers.

In the sweet delirium of that moment no further words were needed to bring closely to each heart the precious knowledge of the love, not then revealed for the first to each consciousness. That certainty, so treasured beyond all other earthly joy, even when their lips seemed sealed in an eternal silence, could gain no added rapture now, when the cruel barriers were removed. Still, the joyousness of knowing that no separation was now required filled each heart to overflowing ; and many moments passed in utter silence before they could with some degree of calmness speak connectedly.

Rose presently asked, however,

"All this is so bewildering ! How have you heard ?"

"Not through Mrs. Headley's relenting, you may be sure," he answered tenderly. "But the knowledge of an inheritance coming through Agnes' mother, which would be Captain Headley's in the

event of Agnes' death, swept away all the flimsy fabric she had sought to weave into new chains for me. The welcome certainty of that was worth more than the very slim chance of making anything out of me ; so she chose wisely, and let her victim escape."

"Does she know, then, that it frees you?"

"Probably not; she may even try to play a double game, but her power is gone forever."

"But you have not told me—"

"Have I not? Well, you so confuse all my ideas."

"I, indeed!" with pretty demureness, "when I am so trying to help you arrange them."

"My sweet darling!" he cried with sudden energy, kissing her hands passionately as he spoke.

She sat silent and trembling for a moment under the overpowering sweetness of feeling how he loved her, of knowing she need no longer jealously guard against the betrayal of her own deep love. Then Frank, with a long-drawn breath of joyous tenderness, went on,

"And so, Dr. Ronald—"

"Dr. Ronald?" she cried in surprise; "what reminds you of him just now?"

"Why, I told you he wrote—" looking at her, very much puzzled by her interruption.

"You never said anything about it or him," she answered in increased surprise.

"Well, any way, he wrote after seeing the Headleys—"

"I should like to know what Dr. Ronald had to see the Headley's about?"

"Why, this matter of Agnes' inheritance."

"Don't you think?" replied Rose very gravely, "that you had better just collect your scattered senses, and tell me connectedly the whole story. You are mixing it all up dreadfully."

"Am I? Well, I don't feel sure of anything just now, except you."

"You need not be too sure of me. Suppose Harry objects?"

"O, I had his cordial consent long ago."

"Upon my word," with assumed indignation, "that was a curious way of acting!"

"It does sound rather presumptuous," he replied, laughing; adding more seriously, "but it was before those dark days, which have so tried me, my precious Rose!—before I dreamed there would be any obstacle in the way of my happiness, could I but win your dear love."

He drew her more closely to his side as he spoke, whispering an ardent thanksgiving for the treasure that had so crowned his days.

She rested contentedly for a moment within his embrace, and shyly looking up said, with a

charming little change of manner and a dainty petulance of tone,

“Well, am I never to hear all this story?”

“By and by I will show you Ronald’s letter, my Rose.”

“‘Exactly,’ as he would say; let us go in now and read it.”

“Not quite yet,” he entreated.

“I could not possibly wait any longer,” she replied willfully. “I am so curious—”

“But I will tell you all he said,” gently detaining her, as she rose and took one step towards the house.

“I will not trust you; and besides, Clare and Harry will be looking for me.”

“Are you in earnest?” he asked regretfully.

“Of course. It is getting late, and I am awfully tired!” trying to look very weary and languid as she spoke.

“Well, if you are tired—” doubtfully regarding her; and then with quick vehemence folded her again within his arms and pressed his lips to her forehead as she half drew back from his embrace. As he released her, she smilingly but persistently moved towards the house, and he, reluctant yet obedient, followed on, and they parted at the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER XXXII.

By the first train the next morning Dr. Ronald made his promised appearance, arriving just as the breakfast hour was over and the guests of the house were busily scattering in various directions.

Frank carried him off for a brief interview in the billiard-room, scarcely waiting till they were alone there before he again cordially grasped his hand, saying fervently,

"Heaven bless you, Ronald! You have given me new life."

"My letter was satisfactory, then?" with dry brevity.

"How could it be otherwise?"

"And the fair Rose?" interrupted the other.

"She thinks you have an especial talent for letter-writing."

"And that is all she vouchsafes to admit."

"On that subject, yes."

"She reserves her eloquence for your private ear of course. Do you know I am already repentant."

"Repentant?" repeated Frank, puzzled.

"Yes; don't you see how I lose everything with my Quixotic gallantry?"

"How do you mean?" very wonderingly.

"Why, my silence would not only have been of pecuniary advantage to me, but I might even have had a faint chance of winning the fair lady myself."

"With the lady I doubt your success," retorted Frank, smiling in glad joyousness; "but what do you mean?"

"Don't you see, if I had not found the right Headleys, as the next of kin to Agnes Lawton, I would have been the heir."

"I did not understand that," replied Frank. "I am sorry I should have led you to such a misfortune; and yet—"

"I assure you it went awfully against the grain to order the money paid over to them. Not that I have not more than enough of my own; but still it was aggravating."

"If it could only have been secured in some way to the other children," began Frank.

"I thought of that myself, but found it impossible. But am I not to see my patients?"

"Certainly; we will go to them now."

Mrs. Ashton had taken an especial fancy to Dr.

Ronald when she first met him at the mountain cottage, and welcomed him now with a warm cordiality which greatly pleased him. With professional zeal he addressed himself first to assuring himself that her arm was indeed progressing favorably ; and as he looked into her bright, sweet face he saw how rapidly her nerves were recovering from their morbid condition—how very soon she would be well and strong again, in full enjoyment of perfect health.

He looked long and searchingly in Rose's fair, blushing face as she came forward to receive him, holding her hand firmly, as he seemed with his penetrating gaze to read her very thoughts. Then, with a faint sigh and an assumption of regret, not all feigned, he said gravely,

"After all, I am dreadfully disappointed, Miss Rose !"

"Disappointed?" she echoed softly, looking up in perplexed surprise.

"Yes ; you would have suited me so exactly. Is it entirely too late?"

"I am afraid Mr. Hilton might object," she answered, half laughing, to cover her sudden embarrassment.

"I suppose he would. Well, it can't be helped now : I ought to have spoken sooner."

"Yes," interposed Frank pleasantly. "You missed your chance on the mountain there, where you had such a strong claim on Rose's romance as well as gratitude."

"By the bye, I saw a very pretty girl on the piazza as I came in, who reminded me of you, Miss Rose. Can you not console me by introducing me there before I go away?"

"Who can he mean?" asked Rose, turning to Frank in surprise.

"I saw no one there but Miss Morton with Maynard," he replied; "you know she has a sort of resemblance to you."

"Are you sure it could not have been any one else?" said Rose, with an air of great distress.

"Why," asked Dr. Ronald, "have you any objection to my admiring her?"

"For myself, no," she laughed; "but Mr. Maynard might not approve."

"You don't mean that she too is engaged!" exclaimed the Doctor, with a look of consternation.

"Unfortunately that seems to be the prevailing impression," replied Rose, trying to put on an air of condolence.

"Well, I am beaten at every point," he said, looking sadly resigned for an instant; and then add-



ing briskly, with a quizzical smile, "When am I to dance at your wedding, Miss Rose?"

She started, with a deep blush of sudden confusion, looking almost reproachfully at Frank as she said, with a nervous tremor she could not repress,

"O, that is too far-off an event—"

"I thought," he interrupted coolly, "that all my efforts and sacrifices in your service might have gained for me that privilege."

"And so it will," she answered gently; "only—"

"Only you want to put it off till I am gone away, so that—"

"But you will come back—"

"Years hence, perhaps."

"But where are you going, Ronald?" asked Frank anxiously now.

"Abroad—and almost immediately," he replied.

"But is not this a new idea?"

"Not very. I have some important business to attend to, which has been too long deferred already."

"But what shall I do without your care?" asked Mrs. Ashton dolefully.

"O, you will be almost well by that time. I would neglect everything rather than go before you could spare me;" and Dr. Ronald gallantly took her little hand, raising it gently to his lips.

"But are you serious in this, Ronald?" asked Frank.

"Most lamentably so. I will wait as long as I can, but at the most it must only be two or three weeks."

"But it would be impossible for Rose to get ready in that time," exclaimed Mrs. Ashton, in tones of serious distress.

"My dear Mrs. Ashton," replied Dr. Ronald, "do you mean to tell me that, with a woman of your energy, such a word as 'impossible' is ever known? I am confident, if there existed a necessity for this marriage taking place to-morrow, you would contrive in some way to manage it."

"I really don't think I could," she replied, looking very much pleased at the compliment to her energy, as was sure to be the case with a person of such naturally indolent temperament.

"Well, I will not ask quite so much as that. But I have set my heart on seeing this match, which I have helped a little to promote, placed beyond possible disaster or delay before I go. Do grant me this favor."

"It is really so impracticable," murmured Mrs. Ashton, hesitating.

"It need not be: I will do all your shopping," he replied, with eager persuasiveness.

She only smiled indulgently; and he knew he had won the day with her.

Meanwhile Frank had drawn Rose a little apart from the rest, saying, with tender urging, in love's low tones,

"My darling, is it too much to ask? Will you not give yourself to me, even so soon as this?"

She flushed and paled as she listened to his ardent entreaty, and felt each word echoed in her own heart. At last, as he waited breathlessly for her answer, she murmured softly,

"Do not ask it. It seemed so unkind to refuse; and yet how can I, so soon?"

"O, my Rose!" he cried, almost bitterly, "if you had ever comprehended the fearful torture of those days, in which I believed a life-long barrier stood between us, you would now bear with my impatience. How can I feel sure, till you are mine, that—" He paused, and looked down reflectively for a moment; and then added, in tones of strongly repressed emotion, "Forgive me, Rose! It was wrong, unmanly, for me to urge you in that way. Not thus will I win my wife. Follow only your own sweet will, my dear one; but remember always how I love you!"

She had shrunk timidly from his almost fierce pleading; but at this change of tone she looked

up bravely in his face, saying, with an effort to speak calmly,

"I will not be careless of your confidence, nor make foolish delays. Dr. Ronald has done us too great a service to have this first request denied. If you so wish it, then—"

"If I wish it!" he repeated, in an ardor from which she shyly turned half away.

He needed to say no more ; and bending tenderly over the hands she abandoned to his warm clasp, he softly and reverently kissed them ; very reluctantly then letting her withdraw again to Mrs. Ashton's side, who began at once eagerly to enter, in a low tone, upon an immediate practical discussion of the necessary details requiring attention. This startled and unnerved Rose for an instant ; but then finding the only sensible thing to do was to yield to this demand upon her patience, she soon found enough in the task which was congenial and interesting, to dispel her timid hesitation, and restore her to some degree of composure.

Frank took an opportunity to say aside to Dr. Ronald,

"I fancy I comprehend your notions, Ronald—that you consider it really important to end at once Rose's cares and duties here."

"It was part of my object," he returned dryly. "I suppose you have duly seconded and carried the motion."

"I have indeed been so fortunate!" replied Frank, with a deep glow of delight as he clasped his friend's hand; "but are you really going abroad?"

"Certainly! Did you imagine I had made that all up for the occasion?"

"I believe you would do a good deal to carry out your fancy and prove your theory," replied Frank. "But still I agree with you too entirely to quarrel with you about the way you contrive to manage us all."

"Well, I certainly am not going abroad for your sake. On the contrary, I should have started in a few days but for wishing to be present at your marriage."

"And so you get rid of all your hyperæsthetic patients at once!"

"I hope by that time they will all have subsided into ordinary human beings."

"You feel confident Mrs. Ashton is in effect cured already?"

"She still needs care, and must not trifle with her newly recovered nervous tone; but by the time she can use her arm, she may also pretty freely do very

much as she pleases. I shall watch over her a little these remaining weeks, while I shall be more seriously observant of my spiritual hyperæsthete."

"You are not still anxious about Rose?" said Frank with a look of sudden alarm.

"I have no doubt of her being all right when in your care; but do you realize, Hilton, the dizzy verge on which she stands, even yet?"

"I had hoped—" he faltered, he looked eagerly at Dr. Ronald.

"Do not think I am unnecessarily alarming you. I only want to impress upon you how fearful a strain upon her fragile physique her supersensitiveness of spirit produces. These next few weeks will try her severely, and you will need to watch over her very closely."

"Trust me to do that with faithful care," he answered fervently.

"It is just your one paramount duty, now; and its performance will restore that healthy tone to your own mind, which you have lost, or at least injured, in permitting it so long and so morbidly to dwell on your individual griefs and trials."

"You think me still so weak on that point?"

"No: you have improved somewhat; but you should have learned long ago that Heaven's design in sending sorrow to humanity is to widen,

not narrow, the circle of our sympathies; that the highest consolation is found in forgetting our own griefs, in ministering to others."

"And in caring for my Rose, which will be so pleasant a task, you promise me every imaginable benefit as well as happiness."

"You would be so bitterly punished if you did not, you could never fail to regret it eternally," exclaimed Dr. Ronald, with sudden excitement.

"Can you seriously think you need to say this to me?" asked Frank indignantly yet gravely puzzled by the other's change of tone and manner.

"It is of no real use just now, of course," said Dr. Ronald dryly; "but if the day ever comes that you see her weary and languid again, with those dark shadows under her eyes, that wistful longing look their frequent expression, stop, and ask yourself what it means."


"Good Heavens, Ronald!" cried Frank, with almost real anger now, "am I a brute that you can speak so?"

"No, Hilton: do not misunderstand me. It would be as much her doing as yours if it should come. You love each other with true, warm hearts now, and each would make any sacrifice for the other's comfort. What I dread is the almost inevitable result of your very love. It is her nature

to give herself heart and soul to the tender, ministering devotion which your nature craves; and the danger is that you may forget how her unselfishness has already imperiled her too earnest life. We want no more hyperæsthesia—either of soul or body. Will you try to remember this, Hilton, and watch closely that this evil shall never come?"

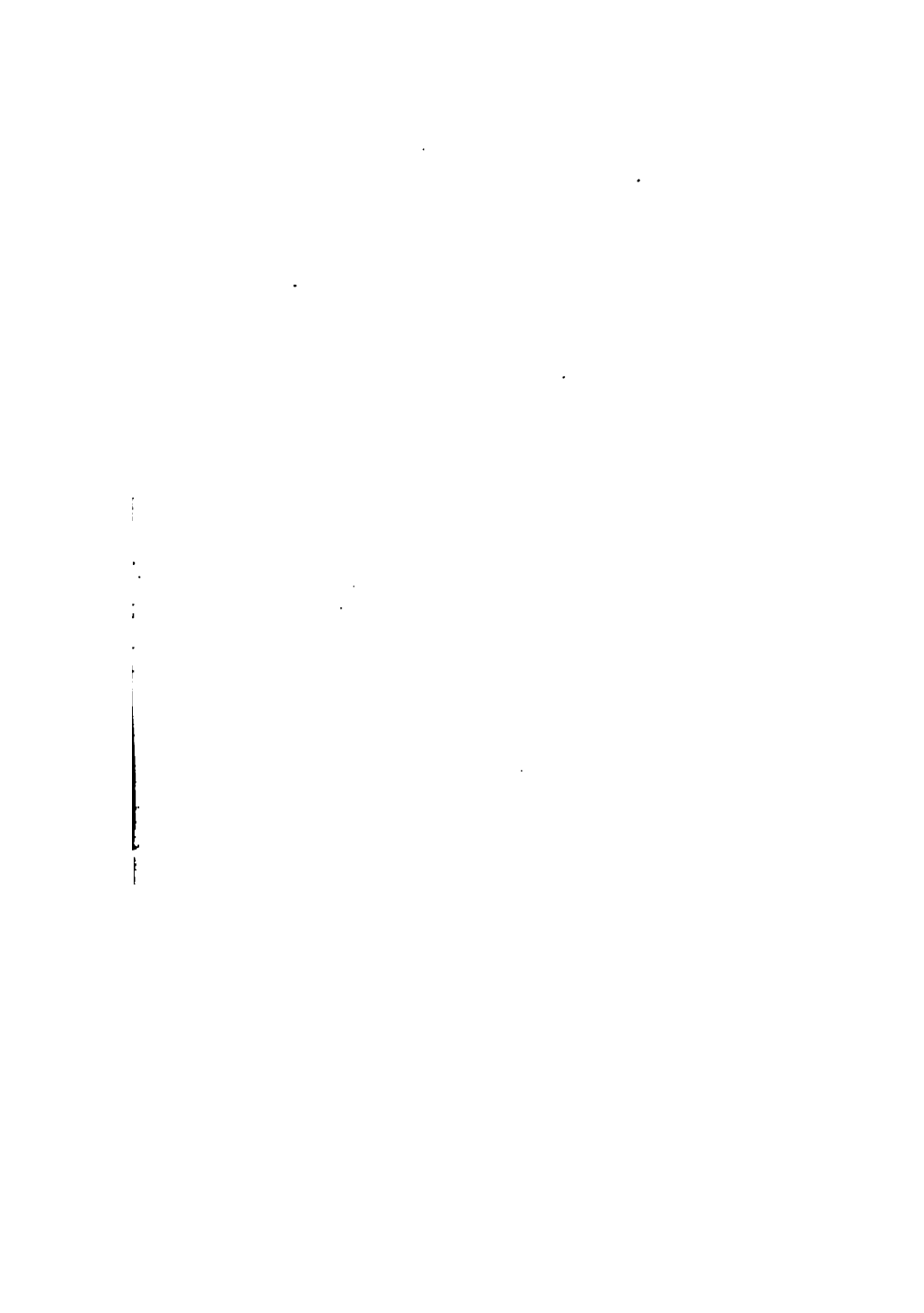
"I will, Ronald," replied Frank, after a moment's pause, drawing a long deep breath of mingled pain and resolution as he spoke. "Come back some day soon from abroad, and seek us by our own hearthstone, where you must always be welcome. Then, if one shadow dims the radiance of my darling's eyes, if her smiles are not more joyous and free than you have ever seen them, take me bitterly, roughly, to task for failing in the sweet duty to which I pledge myself. For I solemnly resolve, in the light of my own knowledge as of your teaching, never to forget the cherishing she needs; never to fail, while life is mine, in the tenderest consideration, and devotion to her service."

"And so," returned Dr. Ronald, warmly taking his friend's hand in his earnest grasp, "so only will you both go gladly through all your days, each fulfilling the needs of the other's nature, and making complete the harmony of your two lives in one."









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